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EXPLORING COUNTERNARRATIVES: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ASPIRATIONS AND COLLEGE ACCESS THROUGH A CRITICAL PROCESS OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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EXPLORING COUNTERNARRATIVES: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ASPIRATIONS AND COLLEGE ACCESS THROUGH A CRITICAL PROCESS OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

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Dedication

To my dad, Mr. Robert Hayes (Daddy-O!), who always knew that this moment would be accomplished. My inspiration and drive has been because of you. Love you always dad, *Chrissie.*

"I keep
Moving forward, pressing onward, striving further
I keep
Keep on laughing, keep on living, keep on loving (yeah)
I keep
Keep on dreaming keep on achieving, keep on believing
I keep smiling when I come thru, and I cry when I need to"
(Excerpt from Jill Scott's "I Keep")

Acknowledgments

In acknowledgement to Jesus Christ my Savior, God my Father, and His Holy Spirit that has truly comforted me. Through trials He has strengthened me. He continually protects me. Lord, thank you.

I began this process with a broken heart. I end this process having have experienced isolation and hurt but also finding support from the people whom God has placed as caretakers in my experience called life. My mother and best friend, Marva Jean Varnar Hayes affectionately called "Miss Hayes" by my childhood peers and other young people who (even in her thirty- one plus years of marriage to my father, Robert Hayes) have been, as I have been, continually blessed by her presence and resounding belief in children's potential. She, through experience, has taught me that all children are important and that if we as adults have any obligation on this earth to humans, it is to children first. I am so glad that I never took for granted the life that she and my father worked hard to create for my sister and I. Even now, I look back as an adult facing the world, fully recognizing the incredible childhood that my parents fostered; imagination, a love for God, and a belief in our own potential as contributors to society was never out of sight. Even with set backs, perhaps inherent to this cold process of completing my work, she always reminded me that neither my identity nor my worth were dependent on the Ph.D. Such a statement could not have meant any more to me, coming from someone who prizes education as much as her. Mom, thank you.

My sister, Dawn Christine Hayes has been my life long guardian and my first, best, and absolute friend. Born in the womb together (identical twin sisters), she has been the big sister, I'll never have. Just a minute younger, Dawn has always been ahead of the curve, for everyone (in my opinion). She learned to read early and pushed me to do the same. I still remember when my first grade teacher publically degraded me because I refused to go by my first name. The class was sitting in a group circle at the back of the room. I had always gone by "Chris" (short for Christi) at home and had never even given "Danielle" much thought, let alone when it came to spelling it. Dawn reached over and wrote my first name on the tin can that was a part of our craft assignment. For some reason, my teacher's response was to be furious. But like some kids, I did what interested me and spelling D-a-n-i-e-l-l-e was not one of them. It was not the teacher's disrespect, but my sister, who in her care about me, took me home that evening and practiced the spelling of my name, that made the difference. At the kitchen table, in our reading room (designed by mom of course), in our bedroom. Over and over, she made me say, spell, and then write my name. Dawn could care less about my protests and objections (a trait that she uses on me to this day). The next day, however, when the teacher called on me before the class to read an assignment, I began with "Danielle, D-a-n-i-e-l-l-e". I wrote it on a piece of paper and held it up for her to see. I said, "This is the name that I have to go by in school. But I am still Chris and I am still Chris at home". I then proceeded to read the paragraph that the teacher assigned to me. Dawn has continued to guide me in times of apparent socio- psychological peril during my process as a doctoral student. She has a deep knowledge about the doctoral process beyond its concrete aspects; she understands the unspoken, often political process that I learned about the hard way. An ardent and prolific self-learner, she understandably intimidates many a professor. But her support and knowledge has been essential to me throughout. I am so proud of the person that she has grown into, and forever grateful for her guidance as my sister, peer, and friend. Thank you, Dawn (love ya).

Ms. Gloria Michelle Allen and Ms. Debbie Blue (who has gone home to the Lord, but whose support and advice in this process remain close to my heart). Two incredible sista's who have really been like sisters to me. I continue to miss Debbie and still grapple when remembering both the experiences she faced after graduating with her doctorate at UT and the responses. Her strong, confident, and faithful manner remind me of how to respond to the inaction of others. Gloria continues to encourage and mentor me. Her experience and advice have been irreplaceable. She reminds me to take it to the Lord in moments when I have needed it most. Gloria has certainly grown to be my friend, and "big sister". Gloria and Debbie, thank you each.

I always thought it amazing that God decided Adam should have a partner. Out of the loneliness that he saw Adam endure, He graciously provided Eve. And for me, He provided Mr. Peter L. Wright. I (half-jokingly) refer to Peter as "the perfect Ph.D. partner. *Gentle. Caring. Kind. Fair. Steady. Consistent. Strong, emotionally and physically.* Peter, whose name translates to "the Rock" (great job mum Winnie) exhibits a faith in, about and towards me that continues to amaze me. With Peter, what you see and know about him is exactly what you get. His "realness" is both refreshing (nope, I never get tired of it) and a characteristic that I will aspire to achieve until I die. Thank you Peter.

I don't have many friends, but the ones that I have are the real deal. To my best crew- Amanda, Scotia, Lucretia, Jeannie, time and distance have never been an issue and I thank you for that more than you'll ever know. To C. Spencer Platt, what an experience. A lot goes unsaid, but I've always been and will always be in your corner. You are destined for great things, glad we are friends.

To *all* students (P-12 or higher ed) in this sometimes isolating race, *you can and you will achieve*. Just ask the powerful students in this study, whose real names are not identified, but whose contributions are invaluable. To my African American and Afridiasporic community- we are already winners. But I thank God for the fire that I have in improving our collective experience. And I thank God for my dad, Robert Hayes, who raised me early on to recognize the beauty, ingenuity, spirituality, strength and resiliency of Black people. Your preachings and your teachings were not in vain.

Who am I as a researcher? I once heard a professor (or two) say of other professors that their work was not as valuable since they were advocates, not analysts. How sad. As a researcher and scholar of color, I write not for appearance, but for cause. For change and improvement of condition. This is especially salient for African American scholars. We do not have the luxury of writing for "loftiness". We are people first, and our job is to tell the story! We serve as avenues for the expression of a broader voice, the collective that is our community. For me, the work is less about myself, but rather about the centering of people and their experiences.
~Danielle Christi Hayes, *July 9, 2009*.

EXPLORING COUNTERNARRATIVES: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ASPIRATIONS AND COLLEGE ACCESS THROUGH A CRITICAL PROCESS OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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This dissertation explored the perspectives of African American youth aspirations for college, their support systems, and their academic and social development towards college. The narratives of 7 student participants were used to gather perspectives of their supports and school circumstances in order to understand how some youth overcome or navigate the path towards higher education. This exploratory study was situated around two primary research questions: (a) In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity building systems (supports and interventions) for college, and (b) how does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

This study contributed to two areas. The first area had to do with providing an outlet for African American youth's perspectives, particularly on the role that their aspirations and support systems play in their ability to access college. In the liberating tradition of critical race

framework, accessing the experiences and perspectives "of the people" is the defining element of this study. We often hear about the pitfalls of minority students; their families and the communities from which they hail. There is general emphasis on this deficit perspective as the public education system strains under a multitude of contending factors. This dissertation, through the narratives of students, explored what students believed to work, what they perceived to fail, and the direction that their perspectives might contribute towards improved policy and practice. Thus, a second potential contribution of this study is its application for policy studies in that a participant-centered perspective is articulated. This multiframed approach demonstrated a more informed space from which to shape policy.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1
Introduction

The Problem

Since the creation of U.S. public schooling, education has served as a means for the comprehensive preparation of U.S. citizens. Inherent to their development within a racially stratified society, schools have reproduced inequities along racial and economic lines. In the wake of legalized school desegregation, researchers have attempted to understand academic performance gaps between African American and White students. As presented later in chapter 2 of this dissertation, researchers have provided several explanations for the achievement gap. Missing from the discourse are empirical studies that center student perspectives as a valid form of inquiry and interpretive analysis about their educational experience and outcomes. My dissertation, which explores the relationship between student aspirations, capacity-building systems of support and intervention, and academic and social development, addresses the identified gap in the research on student achievement. I explore two research questions aimed at understanding this relationship:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems (supports and intervention)?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

In the following section, the reader is introduced to the use of participant perspective through the inclusion of composite counternarratives. These composite narratives provide an example of the method used to develop a descriptive narrative of the phenomena under study as described later in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Youth Narratives: A Prelude to the Study

Devon's Story: A Composite Counternarrative

Spring 2006. To see Devon J. Michaels standing in the parking lot of the community grocer was a testimony about the power of intervention and support. Not that one would guess by his initial appearance. Clad in a dingy, white Hanes t-shirt and low-hanging, almost baggy jeans that draped around his snow-white sneakers, I almost passed him by on my way in to the store. I would have, except that he walked in my direction with an intent look in his eye. He clearly

understood that he had caught my attention. “Miss,” he said. His tone was almost lazy. It was not a salutation, but a way of speaking to a familiar adult that many of my previous high school students used. It was a replacement for saying your full name, though meant with as much respect. Students often used it with the teachers and administrators with whom they had a good rapport.

“Hello,” I greeted him firmly, with ease. He pulled out a pick from his pocket and asked me for a cigarette, to which my response was lightly admonishing and almost parental. Running the pick through his large afro, he asked if I remembered seeing him. I admitted that he seemed familiar, but I could not place him. He nodded slowly, seriously. “Yeah, I remember you from my high school. I’m Devon. I used to run with those guys in the hall all the time by the main office.”

As he proceeded to provide accounts to help me recollect our acquaintance, I not only recalled him, but also remembered that he struck me as an unusually quiet member of a clique who were essentially in-school dropouts. An all-African American peer group, they were perceived as unruly, unmotivated, and resistant to education. I offered to work with them within my role at the school but was met by cordial, consistent rejection. Most of the crew laughed at my offer, citing that it was “too late.” Later I came to recognize that by “too late” these students were really expressing their distrust in the system and, by extension, my own ability to help improve their school experience. Devon, on the other hand, would just stare, smile nervously (despite his cool, confident stance), and follow his friends as they dodged school security.

I asked why he was in the parking lot. Devon replied that he was waiting on his aunt, who was inside the store’s pharmacy. She was going to drive him to Houston for the weekend. “Yeah, I have to be back for classes. I am in college.” He beamed a slow smile at me and nodded, his unruly ‘fro bouncing gently. “I go to A&M Union.”

After congratulating Devon, I asked him about his experiences in high school and how he went from the kid-in-the-hall to a college student. Did he plan, back then, on going to college? What about the impact of his hanging out in the halls and not going to classes? What about his friends—where were they presently, and what did they think of Devon’s success in accessing college? What he shared with me was a tale of support from unexpected places, denial and disappointment from others, and his perception of the school climate during his attendance at the central Texas high school of this study:

> Yeah, I was in the halls a lot. But that was my freshman year. In middle school I was a good student. Even in elementary, I was ok. But when I got there [to high school] it was crazy. I didn't like any of my classes. There were too many kids in them and the work was too easy—busy work. We didn't have a teacher for almost the whole time so I stopped going. At first, I was trying to get into the other type of classes, the smart classes, but it was a special program where those students lived in other areas of town. Instead, I met some other guys and just started skipping with them, you know?
>
> If you went to the second-period class and got counted, you wouldn't get an absence for the rest of the day. Some of those guys were bad. I wasn't. I was quiet, but no one messed with me. I mean the students didn't bother me, but neither did the teachers. It was easy to go through the halls and do whatever. . . . Actually, remember Ms. Dale? She was the registrar. The one that everyone thought was so mean? Well, she used to yell at us, but then one day she singled me out. I was like, "What's up?" 'cause she kept doing that, like, every time she saw us. She'd speak right at me, like no one else was around doing anything wrong but me.
>
> That is how it started. She would ask me why I was hanging around when I was so bright and stuff like that. She offered to help me catch up with my classes if I would try. I started going to her office to make up my work. She'd ask me all types of questions—said I needed a space to think things through. Eventually she helped me get into better classes for the next year. I took some AP [Advanced Placement] classes because that was what I needed to go to college. She kept up with me throughout school and helped me apply to college and look for financial aid. So here I am.
>
> You know what I like most about college? I like going to all of these new places. Before that, I had never even been out of my neighborhood. Most of my friends and family hasn't been either. I had no idea this city was so big. Well, compared to what I knew then.
>
> And I try to tell some of my people when I come home. Some listen, some don't. But I don't give up because I remember the difference from when no one at school cared, right? But then I remember Ms. Dale, who we all thought was so evil, but she was like my coach or something. She just kept on believing in me until I believed in me.

Devon planned on transferring to one of the state's flagship universities after 2 years at his current school to study architecture.

Emi's Story: Another Composite Counternarrative

Emi "Hope" Jones was a local personality in the California spoken-word poetry circuit. You could find her conducting speaking engagements for major businesses and universities or at statewide and national competitions. But for her, "home" was among the audience of young high school and college-age students she interacted with during her weekly Friday night coalition meetings. Youth from all over her city gathered together to discuss issues that had meaning for them: social justice, race, diversity, and class, to name a few.

Of these issues, the youth spoke freely, and their energy and passion for the subjects were apparent. Sometimes the conversations became heated and emotional, but the group worked towards reconciliation and closure prior to ending the sessions. Their most personal experiences appeared more challenging to discuss. When talking about the trials of urban public school life, trust and communication with faculty and student peers were commonly described. The students shared reflections that demonstrated incidents of apathy, mistrust, and neglect.

In one coalition session, Emi had her students write about and then verbally share on the topic "a day in the life at school." One 17-year-old high school student, Danielle Green, wrote about the challenges of navigating an academic tracking system that appeared to segregate Black and Latino students, severely limiting their access to the type of education that she believed White students received. Some articulate, some frustrated, the youth appeared to have a strong grasp of the circumstances they faced. Within this particular group, having a space to recognize and deconstruct these dilemmas provided a powerful setting. The students recognized the conditions they faced but saw them as obstacles to overcome, rather than challenges that blocked their path to success.

I asked about the consistently strong attendance at her coalition meetings, particularly on a Friday night, to which Emi offered the power of providing a space where adults listened and valued the opinions of youth. Reflecting on Danielle's concern, Emi recalled her own history with the issues that her students faced. She shared her strategies that incorporated those experiences into her philosophy and mission as a youth advocate and facilitator:

> I remember showing up for registration prior to the first day of class, high school, you know? I was caught between being a little scared and wanting my mom to be with me and wanting to do it on my own. I did not think anyone else was coming to high school with their moms.
>
> So anyway, I walk up to the lady at the table—they were registering in the school cafeteria and had all of these long tables that you had to wait along. So before I can open my mouth, the lady registering everyone said to me, "What do you want?" For some reason I froze.

Emi looked at me with a tilt of her head. She slanted her exotic, almond-shaped eyes at me with a knowing glance. She continued,

> Well, of course, today I know why—I was a kid. She was an adult and her approach immediately put me in a place of discomfort. I mean, we're at school, ok? What could she have thought I wanted—to buy milk?

As she spoke, it became clear to me that Emi was concerned about the role of power relations and assumptions between youth (especially minority youth) and their adult counterparts. I was reminded of the literature on education, youth advocacy, and youth development that asserts that safe spaces for youth are vital (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Noguera, 2008; L. Rhodes, personal communication, November 30, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Providing ways, spaces, and relationships for youth to organize around challenges that they face is essential (Baldridge, 2007; Deutsch, 2008; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999).

I considered the impact that adult assumptions and expectations (or the lack thereof) might have on the development of the young. Furthermore, I thought about youth–adult power differentials and the impact of race on this dynamic of power differentials. Two particular questions anchored my inquiry:

1. What needs to be understood in order to promote positive academic and social youth development, especially among minority youth?

2. What, if any, attributes do students come with or obtain in the midst of spaces intended to help them develop?

It appeared that adults and the value judgments that they placed on young people might impact the path of the young. Emi's narrative demonstrated that she recognized the relationship between adult judgments and students' interpretation and internalization of them. She responded,

> This is why I articulate the role, the power, and the responsibility of adults in my philosophy. What we as adults believe we can assume and think we can take for granted, we cannot! As I recall, the lady at the school registration table went on to ask my name and I responded. At the time I went by my father's last name, a Haitian surname. As it turned out, the lady registered me, gave me a schedule and told me when to return for school. Part of me thought, "That was easy." But there was something so fast and disinterested in how she did everything. It didn't feel right. Besides, I had been standing there for a while looking at how she worked with other students. You could tell who lived in the neighborhood, and later I learned the privilege associated with that residential and racial connection. The school was a predominately Greek, Jewish, and Italian residential area. I learned not too soon after enrollment that most of the Blacks and Latinos at the school were bused in from other areas to keep the attendance roll up and to prevent the school from closing or consolidating. The feeling that you are there as a "last resort" doesn't give one the sense that they belong, lemme tell you.

I was curious about where Emi's mom was during her attempt to register, to which Emi responded that her mother was actually with her, waiting off slightly to the side. Because her

mother's English was accented with a Creole dialect that some found difficult to understand, Emi and her mom thought Emi could navigate the registration process on her own with her mom at her distant side. She continued,

> Well, no, I guess I could not navigate that on my own. As it turned out, they tracked me for ESL [English as a second language] classes! Well not they—she did, the lady who registered me. But here is the real clincher. You see you only have so many days to change classes, right? But even given that, you can't change all of your classes—or at least the counselor leads you to believe that is the case. Truthfully she was just lazy and had already made up her mind about my status in school. And that's not the worst part. Before you can figure all of that out, you need to know that something is wrong with the classes you have.

Emi's narrative demonstrated a need to critically examine curriculum access in terms of its use to confer certain types of knowledge to certain people (Yosso, 2002). Hilliard (1987) viewed situations similar to that described by Emi in terms of the school's hegemonic structure and resulting practices. Emi's narrative describes a stratified school practice that Oakes (1985) identified in her research on tracking and its effect on minority students. Emi's narrative recalled her school's tracking patterns:

> The way the school was divided, all of the classes along located near my classes were ESL, "regular" or low tracked, like special ed. So in general, everything looked pretty even. But there were these two classes across the hall from me that seemed really different. Smaller numbers of students, and they were a lot quieter. And of course, kids—students talked and pointed out the differences. They let you know pretty quickly where you fit on the scale. They told me where I was and what I was missing.
>
> So by the time I found out that I had been registered for an inferior academic track, my counselor tried to say it was too late. But I knew these twins, they were in all AP classes. They told me that their English teacher—who was Black too, by the way—demanded they be moved out of her regular classes and placed in AP, Advanced Placement. Once their parents got involved, they had all of their classes changed to AP. But, see, their mom knew that system. She did not take any mess and the school knew it. They did not want the twins' parents coming over, because they always made changes when they came to our school. In time, my association with that family helped me. But the twins would say that I did the work and they just helped me along.
>
> You see, I wanted to be a writer. Always have. I knew I had to go to college and I knew that those junk classes they chained me to were not going to help. So I borrowed the twins' books and did whatever assignments they had in addition to my own work, which was so easy, it wasn't much of an obstacle. By the end of my sophomore year, the counselor could not deny me. But to save face, she noted it as remarkable progress that I had made. Can you believe that? I never should have been there to begin with! We knew that a lot of the Black kids were being shoved into ESL and special education without needing to be there. Actually, most of the Black kids knew it. They just did not know how to advocate their way out.

> I recall that one of the twins sent around an informal poll to survey Black kids in low-tracked classes. She knew how many were in her advanced class: two or three. And one of the other Black kids was her twin sister! But despite it all, some of us made it out. I went on to college and still had some problems navigating the system towards the end [pipeline issues dealing with preparation, access, and graduation]. I had to fight for my diploma due to a conflict with my credits. But I got it, and came out with a wealth of knowledge in communications and media production. I wanted to be a journalist and have written here locally.
>
> I fell into this particular line of work [with youth], because I wanted to provide a different experience for them from that of my own.

The composite counternarratives of Devon and Emi are examples of participant-obtained data about their experiences. The section below describes the utility of narratives as a qualitative research method.

The Utility of Narratives: Composite Counternarratives and Interview-Derived Narratives

Narratives serve as a form of "retrospective meaning making" (Chase, 2005, p. 656) that reflect phenomena as interpreted by the interviewer relaying the story. Narrative discourse provides avenues for the interviewee who provides the information and for the interviewer who frames the story in order to convey its significance (Moen, 2006; Moss, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Youth narratives, such as the composite counternarratives of Devon and Emi presented at the beginning of this chapter, provided valuable learning opportunities. They offered a space to share memories and to explore the meaning that individuals attached to those memories. As such, youth narratives took on a central role and were essential to this study, which valued student perspectives as essential to understanding the achievement and college access phenomenon.

Narrative Connection to Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) uses literary forms as one method for developing narratives to capture and articulate the experiences of marginalized people and phenomenon. Literary forms include storytelling, parables, and composite counternarratives that use nonfiction or mixed fiction based on truth and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso explained,

> A narrative that tells another person's story can reveal experiences and responses to racism . . . as told in a third person voice. This type of counter-narrative usually offers biographical analysis of experiences of a person of color. Composite stories and narratives draw on various forms of "data" to recount the racialized, sexualized, and classed experiences of people of color. Such counter-stories may offer both biographical and

> autobiographical analyses because the authors create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination. (p. 33)

The narratives provided earlier were composite narratives based on real people and real experiences. Devon's story came from a real-life encounter with a student who once attended the high school where I was formerly employed. Emi's story reflected the real experiences of a dear friend and my own observations while in high school. Chapters 4 and 5 present, describe, and discuss real narratives obtained directly from the study participants via narrative description and an interpretive analysis of the data findings.

Narrative Research

Moen (2006) described narrative research as the "organization of continuous experiences and dialogic interactions into meaningful ways" (p. 2). Narrative research also uses the stories of participants to inquire, describe, and make sense of the phenomena under study.

The preceding narrative examples are not isolated occurrences. Rather, Devon and Emi's personal experiences as minority youth trying to navigate difficult, inequitable, and in many cases unresponsive educational systems typify the experiences of the youth of this study. Similarly, in her work on teenage resiliency, Bode (1991) used narratives to demonstrate the difficulties that her real-life characters encountered in their personal lives. Her character "Keisha" offered insight into the world of youth who were "beating the odds."

Keisha's was a story of extraordinary circumstances marked by periods of great trials in the form of poverty, murder, and constant upheaval. Her experiences seemed "almost insurmountable" (Bode, 1991, introduction) but were instead met with a tenacious spirit and sense of self. Keisha's attitude was both intriguing and underinvestigated regarding its own merit for successfully navigating the path to college. Like Bode, I used the narratives of the student participants of this study to explore their circumstances and to understand how some youth navigate the paths that they travel. In this dissertation, I posed two research questions:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems (supports and intervention)?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

Operationalizing the Term of Capacity-Building System

My use of the term *capacity-building systems* is concerned primarily with programs and people that build student's capacity to successfully access higher education as well as the experiences and resources that the students involved in the program bring with them. Two components comprise the capacity-building system as operationalized in this dissertation. The first refers to the role of people as an intangible resource for students. The second component of the capacity-building system refers to the intervening role of programs. While programs produce tangible goods, the capacity-building resources that they provide also serve as intangible resources for college-aspiring students. Through my exploration of capacity-building systems, I sought to contribute to what was known about African American youth development for college access by exploring student perspectives of the relationship between their college aspirations, their capacity-building systems, and their academic and social development. Gordon and Brigdall (2007) advocated for creating spaces where multiple forms of capital were developed through holistic educational environments. This research provides insight into such spaces.

Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Aspirations, Capacity Building, and Development

The relationship between aspirations, capacity-building systems, and academic and social development can be illustrated linearly. Aspirations lead to capacity-building systems, which in turn lead to academic and social development. In this relationship, college aspirations, capacity-building systems, and academic and social development are functions of each other. That is, college aspirations and the cultivation and support of such aspirations through capacity-building systems of support and intervention positively impact the academic and social development of African American youth.

This conceptual framework aided in the exploration of questions: What supported and motivated youth to aspire towards college in the face of potential challenges? What did these youth have to say about their experiences? Their successes? Their shortcomings? What supports did these students utilize? What supports did they believe to be missing? Such questions are important because they solicit student perspectives about their experiences with school and nonschool supports. Their experiences address factors associated with continued educational disparities among African American students in prekindergarten through Grade 12 (P–12) schooling and shifting admissions and recruitment policies surrounding race in higher education. The disparities influence currently weak numbers in African American access to college,

particularly at some flagship universities, and therefore concerns the prekindergarten through postsecondary (P–20) higher education pipeline.

Linking Purpose and Method

This dissertation examined these questions by exploring student perceptions using narratives of their aspirations and supports for college access. I interviewed 7 African American high school students, 5 of whom participated in a university-sponsored college-access program (CAP). The reported success regarding college-going rates under this particular outreach program, discussed later in this chapter, served as one reason students selected from the program were identified as college aspiring. In addition, this access program's location in the community of which some of the student participants interacted (e.g. residence, schooling, church affiliation, etc.) made the selection of the CAP appropriate for this study.

The selection of the first 5 student participants in the CAP provided a purposive sample from which learning about successful factors for accessing college was explored. The chain sampling technique, or *snow-balling* (described in the design of the study in chapter 3), was used to select the remaining student participants. Common to all of the students interviewed in this study were their racial background and their attendance at the same central Texas high school. These common factors created a starting point for this study. However, their differing supports, whether participation in the CAP, the presence of another type of support at school or home, or no apparent support, were the focus of participants' narratives. The use of narrative inquiry enabled me to examine what students said about the role and relationship that their aspirations played in conjunction with capacity-building systems via interventions (e.g., CAPs) or supports (e.g., family) and their academic and social development.

Introducing the Background and Context

The remainder of this chapter provides background and contextual information concerning education and African American youth. It begins with an introduction to relevant race-based legal battles in higher education, institutional responses, and more specifically the response of the flagship university in Texas. Subsequently, the reader's attention is again directed to the study's two research questions.

Background and Context

Historically, education served as the space in which the African American movement for human, social, and civil liberty has been contested. The "separate but equal" law resulting from

the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (as cited in Kluger, 2004) was challenged in the educational. Legal arguments purported that the principle of segregation "created a mental health problem in many Negro children with a resulting impediment to their educational progress" (Kluger, 2004, p. 449).

Prior to the 1996 *Hopwood* decision (as cited in Karabel, 2006), which banned racial consideration in university and college admissions, Ivy League institutions Harvard, Princeton, and Yale spearheaded affirmative action recruitment efforts that targeted African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. These efforts were replicated among admissions and recruitment offices at other traditionally White institutions (Karabel, 2006).

The university administrations' actions responded to periods characterized by international pressures that criticized American treatment of its Black citizens, legislation that ended segregation in schooling, and the ensuing threat of national violence and Black revolt on campus. Princeton, Yale, and especially Harvard recognized the growing need to address the race question, specifically whether they would increase recruitment and the admission of African American applicants. Publicly, they offered their changing policies in the spirit of enlightened self-interest and moral ideology. Karabel (2006) wrote, "The Admissions Office . . . though not a specific threat . . . altered its practices. . . . Though no official policy change was announced, the admission criteria were altered to take still greater account of the limitations and of background and schooling that shaped the qualification of many black candidates" (p. 403). Such policies established "'the diversity rationale' for affirmative action firmly in place (the very rationale that would carry the day in the historic Bakke decision in 1978)" (Karabel, 2006, p. 403).

Federally mandated legislation supporting affirmative action policies for the undoing of past racial injustices against African Americans in employment and housing were extended to admissions and recruiting strategies in higher education. Affirmative action policies were once perceived by institutions of higher education as an important tool in assuring a diverse applicant pool. They recognized that educational, social, and economic disparities impacted the admissions potential of otherwise qualified minority and underrepresented applicants. Over time, however, the appeal of affirmative action as a tool for rectifying accumulated disadvantages among African Americans receded. The Ivy League institutions, however, remained concerned about their autonomy in making decisions that supported the overall well-being of their institutions and

their influence on society. As a result, they actively defended the use of race in admissions and recruiting strategies (Karabel, 2006).

Hanson and Burt's (1998) review indicated that resulting from increased competition for students, "Texas was among several states mandated to aggressively pursue the recruitment of students from under-represented ethnic populations (e.g., see the Texas Initiative, 1996)." In order to achieve their goal, one Texas institution (also the Texas flagship university in this study) used two merit-based scholarship initiatives to increase minority recruitment. The result was a 2% increase in the African American student population 1985–1995 (Hanson & Burt, 1998).

In 1987, the CAP was created in the state by the two state flagship institutions for the purpose of preparing central Texas youth for college, though not a direct recruitment tool of the initiating universities. However, the 1996 *Hopwood* decision, which rejected the legitimacy of diversity as a goal, asserted "educational diversity is not recognized as a compelling state interest" (Brunner, 2007). The ruling brought an end to racial consideration in the admissions practices of The University of Texas Law School. Coupled with the interpretation of the Texas Attorney General, consideration of race in any Texas public university was prohibited (Brunner, 2006).

As a result of the 1996 *Hopwood* decision, and the subsequent interpretation by the Texas Attorney General's Office prohibiting public colleges and universities from using racial background in recruitment, admission, or retention activities, the university responded by developing an alternative scholarship means for embracing the university's commitment to a diverse campus (Hanson & Burt, 1998). The university-based CAP selected students on criteria that considered income as well as race and therefore remained in a position to work with traditionally underserved youth. The program, which officially began in 1989, was created under the vision of two university presidents, one involving the university for this study, the other, another flagship institution located in the southern region of Texas. Prior to *Hopwood*, the CAP used race-based criteria (Garza, personal communication, September 7, 2007) to provide specific college-going strategies to target populations. The goal of the CAP was to disseminate information, support, and college access to historically underrepresented ethnic and low-income populations such as African Americans and Hispanics.

According to early annual reports, the CAP was developed as an initiative of the two Texas university presidents in order (a) to create an early intervention program to address

precollege-level (middle and high school) preparation; (b) to improve the college pipeline of students from minority, low-income, and underrepresented youth; and (c) to get students into a structured, nurturing preparation pipeline. A notable difference between this center and those associated with a single institution was the CAP's focus on outreach strategies that prepared students for college at whatever institution they chose to attend. The program did not pipeline participants to any one specific school, which created an environment where students felt free to select an institution that best fit their needs. In return, the program increased participant chances for success and retention in college (W. Nelson, personal communication, October 1, 2007).

The CAP reported a successful record of helping students' access college. According to the 2007–2008 CAP annual report, 100% of the program's 474 seniors graduated from their respective high schools across Texas and 84% enrolled in college, compared to a general higher education enrollment rate of 54%.

In 2003, the *Grutter v. Bollinger* court ruling upheld the University of Michigan Law School's consideration of race and ethnicity in admissions, abrogating the 1996 *Hopwood* decision. In her majority opinion, Justice O'Connor stated that the law school used a "highly individualized, holistic review of each applicant's file" (Brunner, 2006). Race, O'Connor said, was not used in a "mechanical way." Therefore, the university's program was consistent with the requirement of "individualized consideration" set in 1978's *Bakke* case. O'Connor said, "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity." However, the court ruled that the University of Michigan's undergraduate admissions system, which "awarded twenty points to black, Hispanic, and American-Indian applicants," was "non-individualized, mechanical," and thus unconstitutional (Olivas, 2006, p. 81).

With racial considerations once again permitted, the numbers of traditionally underrepresented students could be assumed to increase exponentially. However, there is a crisis in American education. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (2008) *Closing the Gaps Progress Report*, reaching future targets remains an uphill battle in changing the racial disparity in educational attainment:

> African Americans and Hispanics represent 55% percent of Texas' 15 to 34 population, but only approximately 36% percent of the students in Texas higher education. African American males increased their enrollment in public institutions by 11,673 (34.7 percent) from 2000 to 2007, but their share relative to African American females dropped from

> 37.0 to 36.1 percent. Male enrollment for African Americans at public four-year institutions grew by 36.2 percent, well below the 42.6 percent growth for African American females. From 2004 to 2006 there was virtually no growth in undergraduate awards for African Americans. A modest rebound of 5.2 percent in FY [Fiscal Year] 2007 was not enough to keep the number of awards from dipping below the target trend line for the first time. (pp. 1–2)

Summary reports indicated that the state of Texas is not on track to meet the participation goal of the state's Closing the Gaps reports by 2015 higher education plan. Fall 2005 enrollment at Texas higher education institutions increased by 11,225 students when compared to the previous fall, marking the smallest enrollment increase since the inception of the Closing the Gaps plan. Bachelor's degrees awarded fell below the 5-year goal by 500 degrees. Bachelor's awards to both African Americans and Hispanics failed to reach their targets by at least 300 degrees. The state only increased the number of awards in the technology areas of engineering, math, physical science, and computer science by approximately 1,500; the target for 2005 was an increase of around 6,500 awards. Many institutions across the nation are increasing their efforts to secure top national rankings, making it more difficult for Texas institutions to improve the comparative stature of their programs. Texas institutions' undergraduate programs need strengthening (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006).

The shortfall in access to college precedes a looming state economic crisis and national trend towards an inability to compete globally. Texas and similar states have shifting minority-majority populations (Murdock, 2003), thus improving the college-going chances of traditionally underserved minorities is essential to economic viability. P–20 education research on minorities and college access has demonstrated that the lack of access remains an urgent and complex problem. Youth navigating their way through school face obstacles at multiple points, including access to quality public school education, retention issues in public schools, and solid preparation for the transition from secondary school to college (Ambrose, 2003).

Although it is generally agreed that college is important to the social and economic progress of a society and at least two decades of research has focused on the difficulty that many minority youth continue to have in regards to accessing higher education, little has changed. A chasm remains between research that identifies the issues and problems and research, policy, and practice that ameliorate the problem.

The Value of Supplemental Support Programs

Some view supplemental support programs that promote youth development as particularly important for the success of Black youth (Baldridge, 2007; Deutsch, 2008; Ginwright, 2006; Ginwright & James, 2002a, 2002b). Supplemental support programs aimed at increasing college going have included efforts at the K–12 school site, private CAPs, and university-based outreach efforts (Gandara & Bial, 2000). Policy surrounding pipeline efforts linking K–12 schooling to higher education have been offered in the form of tutoring and mentoring, Advanced Placement and dual-credit coursework, and college-awareness campus visits as well as the dissemination of site-based information (Achieve, 2006). There are examples of successful private CAPs such as the Posse Cohort Program (Lumina Foundation, 2004), but few studies have explored student perceptions of such programs. Few, if any, studies of efforts to support college access have made use of students' narrative descriptions of their college access supports that examine the relationship between their nonschool supports and their school environment. Examining student perceptions of such supports as well as the intersection of such supports with students' other experiences and their own higher education aspirations reveals a more complete understanding of the role that college-access support programs play in facilitating college access for African American youth.

The literature on youth development suggested that efforts to work within a youth's sense of motivation and aspiration might assist seemingly disengaged students as well as students with access to support structures (Kirshner, 2006). A common theme found in the composite stories and narratives of Devon, Emi and her students, and Keisha was an intrinsic sense of purpose, supported in some way, that enabled a foundation of self-belief and encouraged a translation of that belief into tools for achievement and success. Building on such a perspective, this dissertation focused on African American youth, their aspirations, their capacity-building systems of support and intervention (through people and programs), and their academic and social development. Analysis disclosed how their experiences formally or informally prepared them to access higher education.

Research Questions

This dissertation explored student perspectives on the relationship between aspirations, capacity-building systems, and academic and social development among African American students and the college access pathway. The study involved participants from one urban high

school in central Texas and a university-based CAP, also located in central Texas. Using a qualitative, critical method of narrative inquiry, I explored the following two research questions:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems (supports and intervention) for college?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

Significance of the Study

I introduced this chapter with a statement of the problem of African American student achievement followed by examples of how student narratives can provide insight into the phenomenon explored in this dissertation. Then I described the connection between CRT and narrative use as method and general line of research. In the sections above, I have delineated the challenges institutions and individuals have faced with regard to supporting African American students' access to higher education and institutional diversity. In an effort to better understand and address those challenges, researchers and policymakers have grappled with these issues from many perspectives (College Board, 2008; Lumina Foundation, 2009a, 2009b; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999, 2008). This dissertation contributes to such efforts by exploring the relationship between aspirations, capacity-building systems, and the impact of such factors on academic and social development among African American college-aspiring students.

The examination of student aspirations and perceptions is particularly important to educational policy. For several decades, policymakers have grappled with declining college-going rates among minority students. Coupled with significant demographic shifts that include a nationwide decrease in the White population, more attention has been drawn to the impact of changing demographic trends on the economic health of the nation (Murdock, 2003). The shifts underscore an increased sense of urgency regarding state and global competition for skills and human resources, resulting in heightened importance for educating and preparing groups that have been largely "mis-educated" in the past (Woodson, 1893/1933).

Exacerbating college access factors are contemporary issues in education like the dropout crisis (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) and the school-to-prison pipeline. These issues have become critical and compete with the still conflicting value whether all students should be for a productive society. To date, the very group that many CAPs target consists of a large segment of traditionally and consistently underserved students. However, some students within this

population navigate the path to college despite limited school-based guidance in the presence of some other form of assistance. This dissertation explored this phenomenon. This exploratory study used student narratives to explore and understand their college access pathways. The outcomes for each student played out differently according to the student's in-school or out-of-school experiences and support (via each student's capacity-building systems).

The narratives of the youth who participated in this study provided insight about themselves and their experiences as well as their perceptions of their peer group. The study participants included students who navigated the path to college using different supports, some formal and traditional and others informal and disconnected from the school. When coupled with insight into their aspirations, their perspectives on support as an intangible but useful resource provide important insight on which to base policy and practice.

Potential Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the amount of time that I was able to spend at the central Texas school site. Although I certainly benefited from a quickly developed rapport with the students and program counselors as well as my contextual knowledge of the school and college access site as a result of my previous employment at the location, I had to consider the limited observations with the students and context of the phenomena under exploration in terms of their in-school experiences. According to Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003), the narrative approach "involve[s] intensive and extended data collection with several interviews with each participant, and participants are given fairly free rein to shape their own narratives" (p. 141).

Another potential limitation involved the changes in interview environments. Environmental changes that occurred during my field work included time schedules of the students and their parents and choice of location for non-CAP participants. I sought ways to reduce the impact of these limitations. For example, because I was limited by my inability to use direct classroom observations as part of my method of triangulation, I employed member checking among the participants and secondary interviews with counselors.

A third limitation of this study involved the sample. In this research I gathered the narratives of African American students involved in a university-sponsored CAP as well as a group of students who are not involved in the program. Although this approach allowed for a comparison and the potential to identify significant issues, the study did not include those

segments of the population considered officially disengaged from the educational system. I intend on pursuing research on the disengaged population in a follow-up study.

A fourth and final limitation of this study also concerned my sample. I worked with a small number of participants from the central Texas area. Although, the narratives that I collected through this dissertation contribute to the knowledge base of our field, the small number of participants limits the generalization of my work. Indeed, future studies that use or build on my approach may be warranted in order to expand the findings of my study. Nonetheless, I continue to assert the value of this study and its potential for a new conceptual framework on which to build improved policy and practice.

Organization of the Dissertation

In this chapter I provided an overview of this dissertation, its intent, and context. Chapter 2 is a review of the achievement literature regarding African American youth performance. Multifocal insights on the literature on youth development and intervention programs intended to build capacity among students were addressed. Chapter 3 details the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter 4 provides a narrative description of the findings, followed by chapter 5, which includes an interpretive discussion of the findings, the study's conclusions, and implications for policy.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature:

Explanations for Low Performance Among African American Students

Introduction to the Chapter

The literature on college access identifies strong academic preparation, awareness and aspirations for college, and the completion of entrance exams and admissions applications as important factors for entrance to higher education (Horn, 1997). Yet, even considering these factors, college access is ultimately dependent upon the ability of students to obtain a high school diploma. Despite debates as to which types of diplomas truly prepare students for college, my position is that high schools should prepare all students for higher education. Under this assumption, obtaining a high school diploma remains an essential factor in accessing college. Earning a high school diploma requires that students master requisite academic skills that are evaluated through standardized tests and grade point averages. The problem is that the literature clearly identifies an achievement gap in performance between Black and White high school students.

Understanding why and how racial achievement gaps occur in high schools, and the effect that these gaps have on students, has implications for our ability to increase the college-going population. As stated in chapter 1 of this dissertation, changing demographic population rates and emerging global competition have increased concern over the education of minority students. What do those concerned with educational outcomes of this particular population need to know about explanations for the achievement gap? How do students interpret and make sense of their school experience and supports as connections from high school to college? These two questions guided my interaction with the literature. As such, I present this chapter in four sections. Because there has been consistent research on high school achievement gaps, and more recent efforts to link high school outcomes with college access, I present a review of the literature describing theories of low academic performance among African American students identified in terms of the Black–White achievement gap. I begin this first section with a contextual definition (e.g., race and historical influences) of achievement as applied to education research before reviewing the major theoretical explanations for variance in African American performance identified in the "achievement" literature. The four theoretical explanations for low African American achievement in schools are (a) racial differences in genetic and intellectual

endowment, (b) sociocultural indicators associated with race and low-class status, (c) low teacher expectation for African American and minority students, and (d) student oppositional-identity theory that denotes conflicts of racial identity and academic progress among African American students.

I then describe limitations of these four theories and present an emerging body of work that links differential treatment of students by race to inequitable school practice. This emerging theory on the structure of schools as inequitable spaces for youth is particularly important since the discourse on desegregation assumed that school integration served to equalize educational opportunities through network affiliation between Black and White students (Granovetter, 1973, 1983; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 207; Wells & Crain, 1994).

Since the literature describes networks as important to achievement, broadly speaking (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1961; Field, 2008; Putnam, 1996), I explore the importance of identity, relational development, and adult–student reciprocity in terms of care, trust, and respect. Relational development has implications for the value of culturally sensitive, culturally relevant approaches and calls for youth-centered inquiry to make sense of achievement processes in schools and its connection to college admissions. I draw upon this framework to support the objective of my dissertation: to understand from the perspectives of the students themselves the ways in which their aspirations for college, their capacity-building support systems, and their academic and social development occur.

In the second section of this chapter, I discuss limitations about the way the literature identified terminology in terms of aspirations and influence and the ways that these processes have been identified in the literature in relation to peer, familial, community, and school influence. In the third section of this chapter, I discuss CAPs, their counseling component, and influence on building student capacity. The fourth section of this chapter discusses CRT in researching race. It includes a recap from the discussion in chapter 1 of the central tenets that guide the theory. Then, CRT's connection to narrative inquiry is explained as a form of centering student voice, interpretation, and the sense-making process.

Section 1: Theoretical Explanations for Low Achievement Among African Americans

Defining Achievement

The literature on achievement has studied primarily student achievement (Ballentine, 2001a, 2001b; Hilliard, 1995a, 1995b; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 2006; Steele & Aronson,

1998) or school achievement (Apple, 1995; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Coleman, 1996; Corwin, 2000) and their relation to school failure. *School failure* refers to researchers' interest in understanding racialized gaps in educational outcomes between Black and White students. The researchers sought to understand the connection between student achievement and the role of schools. Did racialized differences in academic performance exist? If so, why? Just as important as these questions are to contemporary investigations of the racial achievement gap is the recognition that initial inquiries about mental ability were already tied to societal conceptions of race and (in)ability.

Shaped by racial stratification in popular culture, early investigations about the nature of achievement were defined in terms of mental ability along racial lines. Wiggan (2007) identified Stetson's 1987 study as the first attempt to measure differences in intelligence between Blacks and Whites. Stetson's findings were contested when Black participants consistently outperformed their White counterparts; as a result, new methodologies were created employing factors that favored outcomes for Whites. Wiggan (2007) reported another finding that "biological determinism and White ascendancy would become the prevailing argument in debates about Black-White differences in intelligence and achievement testing" (p. 312). Subsequent investigations of intelligence included studies of the relationship between skin complexion and intellectual capacity (attempts to correlate lighter shades to higher levels of intellect), skull capacity, and familial lineage (Wiggan, 2007). Similar to the inquiries about familial lineage, contemporary theories that attempt to explain race and intellect attributed gaps in Black–White achievement to explanations of genetic deficiency among Blacks (Hallinan, 2001; Herrnstein, 1973; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). The inference is that race facilitates intellect as an innate ability or inability that can be identified through tests.

Standardized testing as a variable remains widely used to determine the academic outcomes of students. The variable is historically grounded in racial stratification and concepts about identity and intellect. This principle is often understated and has been overshadowed by deceptively race-neutral, contemporary arguments that testing is an efficient, objective method of measuring academic success. As a result, "achievement" has been widely associated with measurable variables like test scores and grade point averages. The literature on achievement examines student outcomes in terms of how they perform based on these variables. While "achievement" has been strongly associated with academic performance on standardized tests

and grades, missing is the connection to intangible resources (e.g., supportive relationships, intervening programs that target students specific needs), which help students successfully build capacity for academic and social development. It is the ability of intangible resources to act as capacity-building systems for developing African American students' academic and social development, which opens the door to a more holistic understanding of achievement.

After providing the established theories and their limitations, I introduce an emerging body of work that supports a new theory to explain low performance of African American students. The theory asserts that differential treatment of students by race (Wiggan, 2007) explains the Black–White differences in school outcomes and supports my use of youth-centered inquiry to understand these processes. Next, I present the four major theories explaining low performance among African American students as identified in the established literature on achievement.

Defining Achievement: Four Theoretical Explanations for Low Performance Among African American Students

Theoretical Explanation 1: Genetic deficiency. Some researchers have argued that differences in student achievement result from genetic differences (Herrnstein, 1973; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969; Scar, 1992) and that these differences are indisputably attributed to one's racial identity, particularly African American or White (Hallinan, 2001). The theory offers that genetics, not sociocultural influences, are believed to be the root causes of racialized differences in intellect and mental capacity. The theory renders external influences such as support programs futile, since the cause is internal and is transmitted within the racial culture (Gamoran, 2001; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Herrnstein and Murray "questioned the validity of achievement intervention programs such as Head Start and affirmative action . . . because they are unable to overcome deficits in innate intelligence" (p. 313).

Hilliard (1995a, 1995b) and Fischer et al. (1996) argued that research findings demonstrated by Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve* presented a narrow view of human intelligence and excluded socioeconomic factors causing disparities in achievement. Gardner (as cited in Wiggan, 2007) advocated the presence of multidimensional intelligence, which could not be measured accurately using single-dimension tests. Despite the emergence of other explanatory theories of disparities in achievement, Lynn and Vanhanen (as cited in Wiggan, 2007) concluded a study that sought to correlate increased IQ and economic

performance as an indicator of genetically linked explanations for the wealth of some nations over others. Wiggan (2007) pointed out several flaws of the study. One flaw was that Lynn and Vanhanen discounted sociopolitical influences that dominated developing countries, in addition to their unexplained patterns of high IQ scores among some countries. Finally, in order to validate the theory of genetic deficiency, ability test results would have to show a consistent pattern from early childhood through adulthood (Wiggan, 2007). Yet, a disconnect exists between early childhood and adult patterns. Researchers who oppose genetic deficiency as an explanatory theory of achievement gaps have looked to sociocultural factors, low teacher expectation, and student oppositional explanations. I describe the literature on sociocultural theories of low school performance next.

Theoretical Explanation 2: Sociocultural theory. As a result of social activism against racism and racial discrimination, social research looked to new ways to critique educational disparities (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1966; Jencks et al., 1972). Researchers moved from theories of innate mental abilities to social and school-related factors like class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and culture. Sociology, rather than biology, influenced empirical discourse. Sociocultural theories of academic performance for Blacks were tied to implications about race and family structure. Specifically, the literature began to describe a "culture of poverty" as the source of low achievement (Moynihan, 1965). Apple (1995) pointed out that Coleman, whose work on cultural and social capital is heavily cited in the field, argued that problems stemming from students' home and community life rather than school resources or school characteristics served as the sources of achievement deficits. Researchers (Hanushek, 1986, 1989, 1991; Mosteller & Moyninhan, 1972) argued that school resources had a limited effect on achievement when students' family backgrounds were considered.

In contrast, Kozol (1991, 2006); Condron and Roscigno (2003); and Greenwald, Hedges, and Lane (1996) demonstrated a significant relationship between school resources and achievement in school, in terms of improved quality of instruction, for example. Bernstein (1971) and DeMarrais and LeCompte (1995) found differences in language use between middle- and low-class families. Middle-class families' access to richer language sets implied "a logical set of logical operations" (Wiggan, 2007, p. 315) related to improved school performance. Bourdieu and Passeron (1971) as well as DeMarrais and LeCompte described differences in

language use and their implied logical operations as articulating differences in acquisition of cultural forms of capital that facilitates in school achievement for students.

African American sociologist Wilson (1996) said that community disorganization accounted for school failure, among other things. He argued for the role of school as an equalizing resource for all students, but especially for those whose home and community conditions were problematic. Because students are unable to choose their communities, improvements in school resources and conditions are essential features of school improvement and student achievement. The sociocultural theory assumes a passive nature of student, community, and school response to inequities in achievement. It does not seriously take into account the tireless efforts of mothers and other family members who fiercely protect their children's time and whereabouts. It does not seriously consider the African American cultural expectations that schools work as partners in securing and educating their children. This disconnect means that an incomplete explanation and by extension disconnects in school responses are inevitable. Researchers have attempted to address this disconnect through explanations of teacher attitudes on student achievement. The next section describes the effect of low teacher expectations and teacher effects on student achievement.

Theoretical Explanation 3: Low teacher expectations. Sociological explanations of poor student achievement look at the effect of teacher expectations owing to White racist hegemony in public education (Clark, 1965; Rist, 2000). Resulting low teacher expectations has been shown to negatively impact student performance (Mayer, 2002).

Clark (1965) identified "racial exclusion" (p. 111) as a problem in teacher attitudes. In what he identified as "ghetto schools," schools characterized by poverty, crime, and low achievement, Clark found that educators questioned the innate capacity of African American students. This attitude gets at the heart of low teacher expectations of African American students and creates obstacles to their achievement. It also contributes to the stratification of school opportunities, which Wiggan (2007) attributed to the "preparation of second-class citizens" (p. 317). His conclusion mirrored Clark's concerns.

Delpit (1996) identified low teacher expectations as teacher bias against students because of their assumptions about African American student intellectual ability. Ladson-Billings's (1994) work is widely recognized for its examination of teacher attitudes, pedagogical practices, and instructional outcomes for African American students. Cultural mismatch between school

adults and minority students makes learning more difficult for African students, who have to learn the values of the dominant group. The process tends to exclude their own cultural knowledge (Woodson, 1893/1933; Yosso, 2005) and leaves little opportunity for White teachers to learn about the cultural values of their non-White students. Yosso (2005) described community cultural wealth present in communities of color and advocated for the value added when such community capital was acknowledged by dominant society. Valenzuela (1999) found a related finding in her work that examined cultural mismatches about the role of *educacion* (education). I discuss Valenzuela's cultural conception of education in chapter 5 of this dissertation. Low teacher expectations and cultural mismatch regarding school purpose negatively affect teachers' evaluation of their students' holistic experiences. As a result, progress achievement measurements are greatly limited (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987; Wilder, 2000).

In the theory of stereotype threat, Steele and Aronson (1998) argued that negative stereotypes threaten the academic performance of African American students. The students internalize stereotypes about their ability, which the researchers describe as psychologically threatening. Fear of failure is internalized as self-doubt. Failure to achieve would validate the stereotypes about African American academic underperformance. This fear of failure as a validation of inability causes some students to perform poorly or to disassociate with the task or their failure at the task. Casteel (1997, 2007) found that African American students respond in stronger ways to their teachers' beliefs and are more eager to please their teachers, indicating a connection between teacher expectations, the internalization of negative expectations, and African American students' performance.

The expectations of teachers does not account for the overall achievement gap, as student agency and achievement outcomes play a role. Although agency does not always equal success, it does indicate effort. That some African American students perform at lower rates than White students does not indicate an absence of effort, just lower results. Some researchers believe that African American students do not put forth effort but see achievement as antithetical to their racial identity. Subsequently, I describe the final of the four major theoretical explanations for the low student performance among African Americans: student oppositional identity.

Theoretical Explanation 4: Student oppositional identity. Student oppositional culture articulates the role of the student's sense of agency (albeit negative) in the school performance

process. The theory positions the identity development of an oppositional culture within schools as a response to alienation of African American students by schools (McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986).

Ogbu (1998) articulated that African Americans are alienated from school because of their social status and their perception of blocked opportunities. Another tenet of the oppositional-identity theory is that a culture is created that shuns achievement because of its perceived connection to Whiteness. In order to maintain their own cultural identity as Blacks, African American students underachieve to avoid penalty by their peers. Antiassociations with "acting White" have garnered much attention about the cultural identity of African Americans as a collective. Ford and Harris (1996) and Ogbu and Fordham (1986) aligned Whiteness with achievement, inferring that underachievement was identified with a Black identity.

There are variations about the undertaking of student oppositional identities. Ogbu (1987) proposed that these variations could be found between voluntary, willing immigrants and involuntary, unwilling immigrants to the United States. A lack of connections and knowledge about their country of origin makes the transition more difficult for indigenous, involuntary immigrants like African Americans. From this last perspective on voluntary and involuntary immigrant status and opportunities arises the suggestion that the former groups experienced stronger blocked opportunities to capital and capital transmission compared to the latter group. There have been challenges to this theory's presumption of African American underachievement. Lundy (2003) and Hilliard (2003) argued that many African American students see high achievement as cultural agency and resistance to White supremacy. Other studies found that high achievement was used as a form of agency and collective struggle among African Americans (Akom, 2003; O'Connor, 1987).

O'Connor's (1987) research described students' knowledge of structural inequalities that disadvantage minorities' socioeconomic standing as not affecting their proschool aspirations for achievement (also see McNamara Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). Similarly, McNamara Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that African American students manage school success while negotiating peer groups and their racial identity, all while maintaining high levels of achievement. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) and O'Connor (1997) found that for African Americans, a "heightened sense of their constraints produced the desire for agency and optimism resulting in school success" (Wiggan, 2007, p .321).

Summary. The four theories just described articulate biological, sociocultural, and sociological explanations for racial disparities in school achievement. They include a theory of genetic deficiency attributed to low innate mental ability ascribed to African Americans, a sociocultural poverty theory that attributes low school achievement to poor home and community lives of low-income African Americans, a theory of low teacher expectations that attributes cultural mismatch and White hegemonic influences to the negative evaluative and instructional outcomes for African American students, and a theory of oppositional cultural identity that attributes African American low achievement to a response to isolation and blocked opportunities for success. Individually, the theories offer only piecemeal explanations of the low achievement outcomes of African American youth. In the next section, I describe the limitations of the four theories and then offer an alternative explanation in the form of a newly emerging theory and literature that speaks to this new theory of differential treatment of students in schools by race. I use a select body of literature that discusses relational development and youth identity, the role of care and trust as school ethic, and utility of youth-centered inquiry to make sense of the phenomenon studied within the boundaries of this dissertation.

Limitations of the Four Theories on Achievement

Achievement has been explored in terms of the relationship between student achievement and school failure and between school achievement and school failure. The connotation is that the research about school achievement sought to understand structural differences, whereas the body of literature about student achievement sought to understand individual differences affecting African American student performance. The literature is largely informed by studies that support four theories: (a) genetic deficiency, (b) sociocultural poverty, (c) low teacher expectations, and (d) student oppositional identity. A move from innate biological to sociocultural to sociological investigations in achievement has transformed the way in which we study and explain achievement and therefore what is considered important to theorizing the phenomenon. At the heart of these inquiries are the role and place of agency and social change.

In his review of a similar body of work on achievement, Wiggan (2007) asserted that, with the exception of the theory of student oppositional identity, the other three theories "overlook agency and social change" (p. 322). Wiggan found that the theories of genetic deficiency and sociocultural poverty were "deterministic" (p. 322). The theories offer an innately focused perspective that provides little insight about how external support and intervention

programs may assist in improving African American student achievement. They also work from deficit fundamentals that assume African Americans are either unaware of or resigned to their lot as perceived underachievers. The research on student oppositional identity supports otherwise. That is, the theory acknowledges that agency and opposition to stratified schools and opportunities occur. However, oppositional-identity theory assumes a deficit perspective that blames the student and disregards structural roles of the school that contribute to gaps in achievement. It also incorrectly assumes that all students who do not perform as strongly as their White peers do so because they do not value achievement. Theoretical perspectives must facilitate positive forms of agency rather than negative forms that do not help African American students navigate their school environment academically or socially. The theory of low teacher expectations also has limitations. It assumes that teachers have ultimate control of student outcomes. This perspective leaves out the acts of agency that students utilize and does not explain how some African American students successfully navigate similar teacher–student experiences, despite low expectations. Again, a failure of student oppositional-identity theory, while recognizing agency, is that it functions from a deficit perspective. Similar to limitations associated with low teacher expectations and sociocultural poverty, it does not account for students who achieve despite their circumstances or for low-performing students who desire to excel in school.

The literature has indicated that student achievement occurs in the context of a multitude of factors, for which most of the theories would provide tighter accounts if they were used holistically and without culturally degrading assumptions. The theories are individually unable to provide for a complete account of gaps in achievement between Black and White students, indicating that another theory is in order. This theory must account for both structural and agency-related issues. Considering the ever-present factor of race on achievement outcomes, a new theory would do well to look at the interplay of how schools treat students in school along racial lines. In the next section, I present an explanation that theorizes the differential treatment of student in schools by race and relevant literature that addresses student identity, relational development, and adult–student reciprocity in terms of care and trust. The underlying themes of relational processes in schools are cultural sensitivity and culturally relevant approaches identified in the literature (Delpit, 1996; Ladson- Billings, 2004; Tillman, 2004, 2008).

An Emerging Theory: Differential Treatment of Students by Race in Schools

Racialized treatment of students and achievement. Wiggan (2007) best summarized what is supported by a growing body of literature that identifies racial inequalities in school structures as an explanation for the achievement gap in schools (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hilliard, 1991a, 1991b, 2003; Oakes, 1985; Wiggan, 2007;Yosso, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Wiggan (2007) stated that structural inequalities are evident in school and that students are treated differently along racial lines. As I stated earlier, an emerging theory on the structure of schools as inequitable, racialized spaces for youth is particularly important, since the discourse on desegregation assumed that school integration served to equalize educational opportunities among the races. The achievement gap has demonstrated that this connection has not been made. Racially dichotomized practices restrict the distribution of knowledge about curricular access and knowledge required for accessing college. Recent studies on the resegregation of schools do not fully directly address whether tracking and magnet programs serve as public shows of integration while maintaining segregated academic environments and spaces. The line of theory begs the question, did authentic desegregation ever really occur? Similar to the contrast between de jure and de facto policies, public displays of integration are not the same as authentic desegregation, which would provide deep, meaningful resources for all students and their achievement. Wells (2000) noted,

> The problem with any attempt to discuss the "consequences" of school desegregation is the lack of consensus among judges, lawyers, and advocates about the social goals and purposes of this policy. Indeed one of the central paradoxes of the history of school desegregation is the mismatch between the original legal rationale for dismantling dual systems of education and most of the subsequent social science research intended to measure the effect of such efforts. (p. 771)

One such measure to determine the effects of legal desegregation in education is through an examination of student achievement outcomes. As described in the beginning of this chapter, achievement traditionally has been tied to testing as an indicator of academic performance. Such testing has origins within a racialized history. The tradition has continued in current educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which relies heavily on standardized testing to reward or penalize school performance. As a consequence of 8 years under NLCB legislation following neo-conservative policies in education, and decades of racial injustices in policy and practice that have contributed to the shaping of African American inequities,

researchers are examining the larger structural issues inherent to public schools' treatment of students. A growing body of research recognizes the perpetuation of structurally related, racialized aspects of poor school performance (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Wiggan, 2007).

Other researchers (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hilliard, 1991a, 1991b, 2003; Oakes, 1985; Wiggan, 2007; Yosso, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999) have identified the ways in which schools label, sort, track, and devalue students of color. However, Schmoker (1996) faulted the research field on achievement for failing to make actual connections that improved achievement outcomes. Despite the lag in connection between research and policy, Wiggan (2007) noted that students not only received different treatment regarding their educational experiences, "but they are all expected, nevertheless to produce similar outcomes" (p. 322).

The question remains, what is the next step in researching and correcting the disparities that stem from racialized and differential treatment of students? Taking a cue from Sizer (1992), the next step involves investigating "the relationship between how means and ends are related . . . to improve achievement" (Wiggan, 2007, p. 322). *Mean and ends* in this dissertation refers to exploring racialized aspects that stratify schools and the U.S. society that schools replicate and to understanding how capacity building (through supportive relationships and program interventions) may help students to achieve in high school and thereby access college. To that end, a brief exploration about the nature of race is important.

What is race? Apple (1993) stated, "Race is not a stable category" (p. vii). He defined race as subject to change, interpretation, and history. The contingent that shapes race considers "what it means, how it is used, by whom, how it is mobilized as a social discourse, its role in educational and more general social policy" (Apple, 1993, p. vii). Apple (1993) argued, "Much of the same needs to be said about identity. . . . It too is socially and historically constructed, and subject to political tensions and contradictions" (p. viii). He asserted that a multifocal approach to race that draws from multiple disciplines is needed to understand the real boundaries of racial effects. Apple (1993) borrowed from critical perspectives that identify race as "a performance" (p. vii). He denied the innocence of the word. About race, Apple (1993) stated,

> It has played a considerable role in the attempted building of a new hegemonic alliance based upon rightist social, economic, and cultural principles (Apple, 1993). The word OTHERS here is pregnant with meaning since it is through this very process of creating "the other" that racial logics have some of their most telling effects. Behind much of the

> conservative discourse about education—the supposed decline of standards, the call for the return to the western tradition, a reassertion of toughness and discipline in schools—lies the vision . . . of the OTHER. It symbolizes an immense set of fears. (p. vii)

Referring back to Sizer's (1992) statement about the relationship between means and ends, Apple's (1993, 1995) definition of *racial logics* serves as a way of understanding how racial differences in student achievement and, by extension, racialized gaps in college access are replicated from U.S. society and enacted in schools.

Achievement-specific literature that responds directly to the theory of differential treatment of students by race likely will increase. However, bodies of work speak to this theory both in the broader literature on education research and in other fields of study, such as youth or adolescent development and psychology. In the section to follow, I use specific literature that speaks to the racialized treatment and experiences of youth in schools and relational development. These selected works may be used as a starting point for other studies about differential treatment of students in schools along racial lines. Included in this section of related literature, which focuses on how students process and internalize relationships and identity, is a collective review that includes McCarthy and Crichlow's (1993) take on race, identity, and representation in education; Cross's (1994, 2004) African American identity model; Noguera's (2008) work on Black male representation and identity development; Nakkula and Toshalis' (2008) work on identity, relational development, and adult–student reciprocity; Deutsch's (2008) work on interpersonal relationships, relational identity, and intentional youth spaces (after-school programs); and Valenzuela's (1999) theory of ethic of care as it pertains to trust between adults and students in schools. I begin with a brief description of McCarthy and Crichlow's understanding of race and identity as social constructions of Whites versus Blacks.

Racial identity development. Race and ethnicity as definitive identities is an option for Whites and not for Blacks. McCarthy and Crichlow (1993) offered, "Most whites do not experience their ethnicity as a definitive aspect of their social identity. They perceive it as dimly and irregularly, picking and choosing among its varied strands to exercise, as Mary Waters (1990) suggests, and 'ethnic option'" (p. xiv).

In contrast to the optional racial-ethnic identity of Whites, Blacks experience racial identities attributed to them in public (e.g., schools) as culture, ethnicity, and racial identity combined. Specific cultural and racial ethnicities within the African diaspora are neither

acknowledged nor discussed in schools or U.S. society. As a result, a collective racial identity of being "Black" is forced on indigenous U.S. native African Americans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Africans, British, Afro-Latinos and others peoples who, like the ethnicities listed, are related by their African roots in the United States. These named groups are both specific ethnicities and represent a collective culture based on their African cultural lineage. Unlike Hispanics, who are primarily identified as a collective based on a shared language (although a contemporary recognition of racial stratification within the culture is emerging), the Black experience is collectively identified in U.S. society by color. That tremendous variation in complexion, phenotype, and dialect exists within Afridiasporic ethnicities is overshadowed by a racialized concept of "Blacks" that often denotes negative associations like violence and poor intellect. It is the very association of Blacks as having poor intellect and violent responses to their circumstances that fuels the four theoretical underpinnings described in the first section of this chapter.

How does this racialized representation of identity impact African American youth development? Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) said, "The ways that others see us profoundly impact how we see ourselves" (p. 119). Students in particular, enter schools with "layers of historical and cultural experiences that have shaped . . . [their] identity" (p. 121). Because of context-based roles and assumptions, the identity presented "may look different from the one . . . offered to . . . peers, family, or other adults at school" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008, p. 121). Accounting for racial influences on youth allows educators to "meet adolescents 'where they're at,'" since school and society confronts students with racially laden social contexts (Nakkula &Toshalis, 2008, p. 121).

Cross's (1991, 1994) psychological model of change is still widely cited in research on collective Black identity. The process theorizes a five-stage model of "'Nigrescence', the French word for 'the process of becoming Black'" (Cross, 1991, p. x). Although Cross (1991) described his theory as applying primarily to adults, the framework can be used to describe adolescent identity development in terms of how individuals are "transformed by a series of circumstances and events" (p. 190). The emphasis in this model is transformation rather than the oppositional resistance alluded to in Ogbu's work (Ogbu, 1981a, 1981b, 1987, 1988, 1991, 2003, 2008; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986).

Cross (1991) wrote, "Nigrescence is a *resocializing* experience; it seeks to transform a preexisting identity (a non-Afrocentric identity) into one that is more Afrocentric" (p. 190). There are five stages of the process of Nigrescence:

> Pre-encounter (stage 1) depicts the identity to be changed; Encounter (stage 2) isolates the point at which a person feels compelled to change; Immersion-Emmersion (stage 3) describes the vortex of identity change; and Internalization and Internalization Commitment (stages 4 and 5) describe the habituation and internalization of the new identity. (Cross, 1991, p. 190)

Cross (1991) said that persons in the pre-encounter stage recognize race as low in importance, perceive their race as neutral to who they are, or are anti-Black. Low importance and race-neutral stances may occur for a number of reasons: attachments to some other thing or value like religion or language (in the case of Hispanics). Anti-Black sentiments stem from an internalization of race-related social stigmas and a desire to disassociate with such stigmas. Similar to, but a converse take on Ogbu's student oppositional theory, the goal of being anti-Black is to be as unlike the group in question as possible (Cross, 1991).

At the point of encounter, a person experiences the initial transition between the *first* or *known self* and his or her new Afrocentric-valued self (Cross, 1991). Cross (1991) said that the encounter stage usually occurs as a result of a deep, meaningful, or traumatic event that counters what a person (the first or known self) once believed to be true about his or her low, neutral, or anti-Black values: "Encounter has the effect of catching him or her 'off guard'" (p. 199). In African American popular culture, this is referred to as "The Wake Up Call." The phrase refers to the moment when Black people encounter situations where their identity as "just a person" or "just one of them" (referring to the dominant group) is soundly rejected by the person, group, or event of which the Black person believed he or she would be sincerely accepted. Examples of events that can trigger the encounter experience include the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which Cross (1991) described as sending "thousands of Pre-Encounter Negroes on a search for a deeper understanding of the Black Power movement" (p. 199). Another example is "witnessing a friend being assaulted by the police" (Cross, 1991, p. 199). The "search" is a quest for understanding, healing and acceptance through membership in collective identity.

The third stage of the Nigrescence process, Immersion-Emersion, marks a boldness in terms of commitment to the transforming self. This can be seen in physical demonstrations such as clothing, hairstyles, and other public displays. During Immersion, individuals are learning and

consuming all that they can about their new identity and commitment towards serving the Black culture. Immersion marks a "coming to" or a balance between "oversimplified ideologies" and the development of a more mature Black identity that is marked by regained "control of his or her emotions or intellect" (Cross, 1991, p. 207).

The final stages of the Nigrescence process, Internalization, indicates a "settled" self (Cross, 1991, p. 210). The person in this stage is able to move to other areas of concern without necessarily doing away with Nigrescence. The ways that people merge or balance their settled identity with other aspects of life mark the Internalization-Commitment stage (Cross, 1991).

While Cross's Nigrescence model of racial identity mainly addresses the individual process of African Americans' response to their racialized identities, other literature on youth describes identity development as relational or reciprocal in terms based on respect and trust between adults and youth (Delpit, 1996; Deutsch, 2008; Gordon & Brigdall, 2007; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999).

Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) conceptualized relational development as the evolvement of identity as it unfolds "within meaningful relationships" (p. 79). They elaborated on developing "capacity to be in a relationship with peers and significant adults where a sense of trust and the ability to grow and take risks were foundational" (p. 80). The foundations permitted transmission of developmental opportunities from one (nonschool) setting to another (formal school) setting. Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) provided an example of one student who was able to take her relational development from her nonschool setting and bring it "back into her school relationships, and her academic achievement began to rise" (p. 81).

Nakkula and Toshalis's (2008) findings on relational development and its transmission to other settings shed important light on the role of intangible resources like support and CAPs or after-school programs as capacity-building systems that link students' individual agency or aspirations to their academic achievement and social development. Their findings demonstrated that individual-level factors (aspirations), when supported, can build academic capacity for students of color. Relational development relies on the combined input of both students and adults. These partnerships facilitate a connection between students' college aspirations and college access or preparation-building opportunities (O'Connor, 1997, 1999). O'Connor (1997) also indicated that these connections assisted students of color in addressing racial barriers. The findings denoted the presence and importance of supporting individual and collectively forms of

agency to improve achievement and facilitate the transition to college. The findings also indicated that relational development draws from relationships of care and trust.

When trust in schools is missing, achievement levels are negatively affected. In contrast to Ogbu's (1981a, 1981b, 1987, 1988, 1991, 2003, 2008) focus on individual-level and cultural factors to account for poor achievement, Noguera's (2008) research on Black male educational experiences found that "trouble begins at school" (p. xvii). Noguera (2008) cited a Schott Foundation report, which found that Black males were overrepresented "in every category representing failure and distress—discipline referrals, dropout rates, grade retention" (p. xvii). In contrast, the Schott Foundation report found that Black males were "vastly underrepresented . . . on every indicator associated with progress and achievement—enrollment in honors courses, Advanced Placement, and gifted programs" (Noguera, 2008, p. xvii).

Noguera (2008) reported that school conditions created and maintained the crisis of Black male achievement. Dismal conclusions on their disconnect to AP and honors courses, coupled with high numbers of discipline incidents and dropout rates are serious indicators of Black males' failure to obtain high school diplomas, let alone access college. Relational development and reciprocal relationships, deemed important to youth development, cannot exist in school environments where, as Noguera (2008) stated, "the normalization of failure on the part of Black males is . . . pervasive" (p. xix). Noguera (2008) attributed educators' complacency about Black male failure to poor school environment and attitude communicated by schools. Deutsch (2008) also reported,

> The regional climate of schools has been found to be particularly important for African American males. Researchers examining African American males' school experiences have found that teacher-student relationships characterized by distrust, disrespect, and stereo-typing are associated with students' acting out and disciplinary conflicts. (p. 44)

Ladson-Billings' (1994) *Dreamkeepers,* Delpit's (1996) *Other People's Children*, and Valenzuela' s (1999) *Subtractive Schooling* remain three seminal works that detail the importance of student–adult relationships and their effect on school culture and achievement outcomes. Ladson-Billings (1999) identified critical factors effecting teacher–student environments that included "teachers conceptions of themselves and others . . . the manner in which classroom social interactions where structured . . . and teachers' conception of knowledge" (p. xiii). Similarly, Delpit (1996) understood these aspects to reflect a process of communication between teachers and students across cultural lines. The ability to transmit

knowledge and how that knowledge is interpreted are bound up in how teachers understand and relate to the students who enter their classrooms. In an increasingly diverse student population, cross-cultural communication becomes more important to teacher–student relationships. Valenzuela's (1999) research on subtractive elements in schools when care is not related to students care powerfully attests to the import of meaningful relationships between adults and students builds. Cultural mismatches about the role of schools—the Eurocentric view that schools are objective spaces in which to fill students with knowledge—clashes with Mexican beliefs that *educacion* is holistically about both character building and learning. Similar beliefs among African American communities illuminate the culturally centered values as conflicts between schools and the communities from which a growing portion of their students come. School staff's misrecognition of the existence of these cultural community values blocks their ability to transmit authentic forms of care (Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, students tested "care" (particularly teacher care, in the case of Valenzuela's study) and internalized the messages that were communicated to them as school culture. When that care appears to be unauthentic, reminiscent of Ogbu's theory, Valenzuela (1999) found that marginalized students "overwhelmingly conform to the 'uncaring student prototype,' they engage in such deviant behaviors as skipping class and hanging out (lounging in the cafeteria through all three lunch periods is a favorite pastime)" (p. 77).

The literature collectively identifies a relationship between school values as espoused through adults in schools and student achievement. Students appear critically aware of dichotomous opportunities that create unequal paths towards their achievement. The literature provided indicates that achievement and behavior are responses to students' treatment and experiences in school. Relational development is necessary for facilitating both positive identities and achievement patterns among all youth, but especially minority students like African Americans. Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) identified educator agency as an important factor in youth development. Of the influence of school adults' interactions with students, they stated:

> When teachers deliver a lesson, they are interacting with more than their students' intellects; when school counselors talk with students, they address more than feelings; when administrators discipline students, they deal with more than behavior; when coaches teach athletes how to play a defensive zone, they are affecting more than physical skills. The applied developmental work of adults in schools is never one-dimensional as our compartmentalized roles might suggest. Whether or not we are aware

> of it, when schools interact with adolescents in school spaces, we are engaging the interplay of intellect, feelings, behaviors, and bodies—both ours and our students'-—which make it a complex undertaking. Perhaps the most effective way to understand what is at stake in these interactions is to view them as manifestations of identity. (pp. 17–18)

Perhaps the most definitive way to view the connection between schools, school adults, and youth has been expressed by Nakkula and Toshalis (2008), who argued, "Our work in schools is identity work" (p. 18). Similarly, Deutsch (2008) said, "Examining how youth negotiate and build identities in after-school contexts can help researchers understand how youth use their social contexts and relationships in their constructions of self and, thereby, how these and other settings can best support youth development" (p. 4). The call for relational, reciprocal relationships between adults and youth complements Wiggan's (2007) call for student-based inquiry, especially as it pertains to students' school experiences. The quotes from Nakkula and Toshalis and from Deutsch speak to an essential tenet of this dissertation: to explore how people and interventions serve as capacity-building systems that contribute to students' academic and social development. While the quotes refer to processes that occur in different spaces—schools in one study and after-school programs in another—this dissertation looked at both a formal school and a CAP not a part of the school. Implications of what works in one setting (the CAP included in this study) may be useful in the improvement of another setting for youth (school). Increasing literature supports the role of supplemental educational spaces as positive influences on students' academic achievement and social development (Checkoway et al., 2005; Deutsch, 2008; Gordon & Brigdall, 2007).

Schools, however, remain the largest source for reaching students collectively in the United States. Whereas Delpit (1996), Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1998), Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), and Valenzuela (1999) focused on teacher–student relationships, Tillman (2002, 2008) examined the role of African American principals and culturally sensitive practices in schools. Tillman's (2002) work on culturally sensitive research says that shared knowledge is important to research methodology and analysis. I extend this concept to link educators of color, like teachers and principals, as solution makers to the problem of African American achievement. Situating her frame in the cumulative scholarship of Hilliard, who acknowledged but did not excuse the racial achievement gap, Tillman (2008), like Wiggan (2007) and other researchers concerned with race and education, identified the "absence of the opportunity to learn as a result of the unequal distribution of educational resources" (p. 592).

Like Delpit (1996), Ladson-Billings (1999), and Hilliard (1987, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2007), Tillman (2008) was concerned with "teachers and leaders who were knowledgeable about African culture" (p. 592). Tillman (2008) also identified Hilliard's "concern with minimal competency standards" as problematic to African American achievement (p. 592).

In contrast to inequitable school structures, Tillman (2008) found that Black principals believed "academic and social development of Black students was a priority" (p. 596). This value filtered the actions of these school leaders and their work at transforming the Black students' school experience both academically and socially. They "worked to secure funding, resources, and qualified and committed teachers in an effort to provide Black students opportunities to experience success" (Tillman, 2008, p. 597). In addition, Tillman (2008) discovered that the focus for Black principals was not helping Black student assimilate into White culture, but that

> [Black] principals believed that they must help Black students develop self-esteem, help them to set goals, help them to develop a work ethic, and help them prepare for success in the larger society—a society that often marginalizes them as human beings. Student failure was simply not permitted among this group of leaders. (p. 597)

Cultural relevance and sensitivity within relational development of adult–student relationships served as a foundation for Black student achievement. The presence of a collective identity and experiences with race as the major emphasis of that identity appeared to make Black principals particularly qualified to help Black youth develop successfully. While Tillman's (2008) findings do not negate non-Black educators' participation, her work emphasized the need to increase African American representation at all levels of the educational system, especially in the teaching force and principalship.

Summary

In attempts to explain achievement gaps between Black and White students, and the low performance of some African American students in particular, four explanations have been widely used in the literature: (a) genetic deficiency, (b) sociocultural poverty, (c) low teacher expectations for students, and (d) student oppositional identity. Stemming from deficit perspectives, these models fail to account for underperformance. An alternative theory emerging in the field was introduced as a more likely explanation for African American student underperformance. This new theory asserts that inequalities in achievement stem from

differential treatment of student by race in the school environment. Literature was presented that described the influence of race on African American identity development, the importance of relational development, and the impact of care (or the lack thereof) on students and adult–student relationships. Whereas much of the work on schools described teacher influences, Tilllman's (2008) research emphasized the role of principals and the importance of having African American principals who share and value their cultural identity to improve student achievement outcomes. The multifocal approach to the literature to examine differential treatment of students revealed that differences in access to tangible and intangible resources occur in different educational spaces, schools or supplemental nonschool programs. The literature indicated that schools do not provide equitable access to both types of tangible and intangible resources necessary for college access. However, research has indicated that relationships between adults and students play an important role in bridging the gap between resource attainment and African American students' achievement in high school and, by extension, their college access. As the field of education research begins to make connections between K–12 and higher education, one problem that has been encountered involves the (mis)use of terminology to describe and define college access factors. In the next section, I provide an account of this limitation before addressing CAPs and CRT in education in the final sections of this chapter.

Section 2: Limitations of the Current Literature's Terminology

Public education (P–12 schooling) and higher education were originally created as two separate systems (Karabel, 2006). In the wake of an increasingly global economy, both higher education and public schools systems faced challenges about their student populations. Systems of higher education became increasingly concerned with the number of admitted students requiring remedial education. Diversity was another concern for institutions of higher education as the debate of its role and purpose involved several legal challenges over the past three decades. Student caliber and diversity, particularly racial diversity, was often linked in discourse over higher education admissions processes. Public education was created to educate the mass of the American public. Despite the legal desegregation of U.S. schools more than 50 years prior to this study, achievement gaps traced to inequitable distribution of resources and structural inequalities remain.

Over the last two decades drives to create smoother transitions between the two systems have become nationwide objectives (e.g., Achieve, 2006, 2009; College Board, 2004, 2007,

2009; Education Trust, 2009; Immerwahr & Johnson, 2009; Kirst, Venezia, & Antonio, 2003; Lumina Foundation, 2004, 2009b; Pathways to College Network, 2008, 2009). The process of linking the two systems in terms of preparation and access is generally referred to as K–16 or P–20 (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Studies about college access, preparation, readiness, retention, and success are found in both higher education and public education research. A combined and articulated source for literature on the common connection between the two systems is vague. Some explanations for the disconnect include differences in system missions, owing to varied histories, contexts, and populations served (Karabel, 2006). Perhaps the underlying explanation is that neither system wishes to give up its specific place in the public education or higher education dichotomy. Research still operates within academic silos, of which a combined P–20 field may not yet have found its place.

Whatever the political conflicts, student achievement gaps in public schools are felt by colleges and universities in need of new recruits qualified to handle the college curriculum. Issues of academic preparation and access binds the two systems, but access to research about how the systems address the achievement, preparation and access gap is scattered between the two bodies of literature in higher education or education research. What might be identified as P-20 literature is limited by inadequate labeling of terminology as it relates to agency and support. Next, I discuss how the terms "aspirations" and "influence" have been articulated, and offer a new perspective that re-focuses "aspirations" and "influencers" as terms describing intangible capacity building resources of agency and support for African American students' achievement and social development.

What Counts as an Influencer?

Influencer refers to external factors that affect student achievement and account for the theoretical explanations described earlier in this chapter. Influencers can be identified in one of two categories, social influencer and school influencer.

Social influencer refers to parental involvement (Coleman, 1966, 1990, 1994; Duncan, 1969; Lareau, 2000), peer influence (Coleman, 1961; Ogbu, 1981a, 1981b), and neighborhood effect (Kozol, 1991; Wilson, 1987). The theoretical explanations discussed previously in this chapter are examples of how research situates the presence or absence of external agency and support within its assumptions about student failure. Theories like student oppositional identity and sociocultural poverty neglect student agency and deficit community agency and support.

School influencer encompasses teacher attitudes (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994), counselor attitudes (Delany, 1991; McDonough, 1997, 1999, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996), and experiences related to the external factors like curricular knowledge exclusion. Whereas the literature relating to influence factors has identified aspects of access to tangible resources (e.g., curriculum, class work, college applications), intrinsic motivation of students has received less attention. External influences have been widely examined in terms of student and school-related failure. Missing from the discourse is the role that students' own intrinsic drive plays in their quest for accessing college. I refer to this intrinsic influencer as *aspirations* and describe it next.

What Counts as an Aspiration?

Yosso (2005) described aspirational capital as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). A few studies have touched somewhat on the role of aspirations among students, though in the context of other investigations or in relation to resiliency frameworks (Auerbach, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1994; Gandara, 1982, 1995; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Solorzano, 1992).

Because of the emphasis on external influencers and student achievement, attention about what students themselves bring to the table has been overshadowed in education research literature. The advent of critical and cultural perspectives on education has begun to address this from a macro approach (e.g., recognizing that students bring cultural assets to schools), but micro-level studies that emphasize student voice are needed. Former theories attempting to explain individual-level processes, like genetic deficiency, imposed racist explanations that neither proved accurate nor considered students' perspectives of their own experiences. Whereas individual agency has been explored in psychology and youth development fields, the specific recognition of aspirations as its own factor (perhaps related to the broader category of motivation) is missing. This dissertation addressed the gap by researching the role of aspirations as an intrinsic value for accessing college among the African American students in this study. Gandara and Bial (2001) noted Adelman's assertion that " if aspirations are defined as what a student is *planning to do* after high school, and if their responses are consistent over time, aspirations have much greater predictive power" (2001, A-7). Adelman's (1999, 2000) work on aspirational development suggests a connection between student support and development.

Examining how aspirations works with capacity-building systems has promising implications for education research. First, it recognizes internal drive as an asset to student achievement and development outcomes. Second, it may serve as a foundation for capacity building. In other words, aspirations as an intrinsic resource can assist the development of academic and social development (achievement) through capacity-building supports and interventions (people and programs) that serve as intangible and tangible resources. A third implication is that intrinsic aspirations for college can be increased, maintained at current levels, or decreased. The identification of influencers I have provided allows for a clearer view of aspirations and its potential. Next, I discuss the place of aspirations and influencers in terms of student assets, parental roles, teacher attitudes, and counselor roles.

Aspirations and Influence Revisited

Student assets and aspirations. The experiences voiced through the youth narratives in this dissertation provide support for the premise that students aspirations may be a more important element in the engagement equation than current policies and programs anticipate. Anyon's (2005) review of the trajectory of educational policy offered the need "to rethink strategies we choose in our long-term attempts to solve the problem of school and student achievement" (p. 66). She found that policy trends aimed at improving urban communities and schools actually "maintain minority poverty . . . and thereby create environments that overwhelm the potential of education policy to create systemic, sustained improvements in the schools" (Anyon, 2005, p. 66). Anyon stated that these "macroeconomic policies penalize Blacks and Latinos" (p. 71).

Considering the gravity of policy constraints in education and on the communities of African Americans and other persons of color, the need to support minority youth is critical. And yet, in spite of the local and external challenges, some minority youth aspire to achieve and navigate the pathway to college. The term *capital* has been used in education research literature to describe physical and nonphysical properties that people accrue and develop in order to access power and status (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, 1990, 1994; Putnam, 2000). However a result of this study has been the recognition of student-developed assets that do not necessarily fit neatly into the traditional definition of capital. The term *capacity building* in relation to the accruement and development of assets more appropriately describes the combination of resources, experiences, and support that the students of this study utilized to make sense of their

environment in school. Capacity building suggests that holistic processes serve as forms of capital and connect them to capital.

Gordon and Brigdall's (2007) work on affirmative development of academic ability policies and youth education articulated the use of a holistic approach designed to impact the development of African American students' access to capital, particularly social and human capital. Gordon and Bridgall noted the presence of *personal capital,* referring to one's "disposition, attitudes, aspirations, efficacy, and sense of power" (p. 91). Gordon and Brigdall advanced this form of capital as a derivative of Bourdieu's social capital. Both Gordon (2007) and Greeno (2007) used personal capital within an academic framework, purporting that the education agenda must reflect the intentional high achievement of students of color in order to increase the national pool of knowledge, a type of brain trust, if you will, that has been stifled by "inadequate opportunities to learn" associated with historical inequality (Greeno, 2007, p. 27). In his definition of intellective competence, Gordon (2000) promoted

> the developed abilities to perceive critically, to explore widely . . . to bring knowledge and technique to bear on the solutions of problems, to test ideas against explicit and considered moral values, as well as, against empirical data, and to recognize and create real and abstract relationships between concrete and imaginary phenomena. Intellective competence reflects the effective orchestration of . . . mental processes in the service of sense making. (p. 17)

In essence, Gordon and Brigdall (2007) envisioned the nature of what learning should look like. In relation to this concept of youth development, Greeno (2007) situated the development of one's "positional identity" (p. 18) as an enabler of intellective competence. Greeno examined classroom settings as social worlds in which "social practice, including patterns of interaction, cultural understandings, assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms," occur (p. 18).

Gordon and Brigdall (2007), and Greeno's (2007) concept of personal capital could be applied to CAPs (which serve as a form of nontraditional schooling) in order to study the impact that interventions or supports have on student aspirations and self-efficacy. Intended as a tool of inquiry for the college aspirations of students, this study focused on the relationship between aspirations, capacity-building systems of support and intervention, and academic and social development. A few research efforts assessing the impact of supplemental programming on youth development have had mixed results in the literature on achievement but consistently

positive results for youth's social development (Atkins & Hart, 2002; Deutsch, 2008; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002a, 2002b; Kahne et al., 2001; Kirshner, 2006; Kirshner et al., 2003).

Capital assets, the leveraged resources that allow one to accrue other forms of usable goods (material or conceptual) vary in their ability to be transmitted. Bourdieu (1986) asserted that cultural capital requires more than attainment, it requires time. Without such, the value of its services risks compromise. Social capital, the tangible benefits and resources that accrue to people by virtue of their inclusion in social structure (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), allow access through membership in networks and institutions that can be converted into other forms of capital (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003). Rather than posit the transmission of capital as a function of inherited assets and ability, Gordon (2007) asserted that the development of intellective abilities is cultivated through affirmative educational supports. His assertion represents a core theme in the literature on youth development, though empirical research supporting the theory in education is still in progress. Nonetheless, the existing literature views supplemental support programs (like after-school programs, and youth centers) as important for creating safe spaces promoting empowerment and skill development for youth. These capacity-building interventions are noted for their ability to initiate student participation. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2002) noted,

> Youth participation is about the real influence of young people in institutions and decisions. . . . Quality is the most significant measure of youth participation. Studies show that youth participation has the potential to increase individual involvement and build . . . capacity. It can strengthen personal confidence, contribute to civic competencies, and serve as a source of leadership development. Although the benefits are not well established by a great deal of system research, there is enough knowledge to substantiate its benefits. These initiatives can strengthen social justice in the ways that improve conditions for all people while emphasizing resources and opportunities for those lacking in both. (pp. 15–16)

This dissertation on the relationship between students' college aspiration, support systems, and academic and social development serves as just one more project that responds to Checkoway and Richards-Schuster's (2002) acknowledgement about the need for further research to substantiate the benefits of these types of support systems. Valenzuela's (1999) research on the relevance of fostering school cultures within an ethic of care addressed the impact of care as a supportive precursor and sustainer of support. The interplay between care and

capital is discussed further in chapter 5 of this study. The role of parents as an influencer in the aspirations construct is addressed next.

The role of parents. Research has validated the link between parental involvement and family background as well as the relationship to student achievement of the role of parental attitudes toward education, expectations, and school-related involvement (Gandara, 2002). Miller (1995) examined the impact of cumulative disadvantage among African Americans and Hispanics, noting that access to lower quality education is consistently perpetuated across the generations. As a result, the ability to transmit educational advantages is impeded, placing children at a disadvantage, despite the appearance of equal levels of schooling between White and African American families. These patterns coincide with findings that are associated with the transmission of cultural capital, symbolic representation of cultural domination vis à vis knowledge of the taste, norms, and preferences associated with the elite or preferred class (Ballentine & Spade, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Massey et al., 2003).

Education research has acknowledged the racist legacy of cumulative disadvantage, as "wealthy well educated black parents are less able to transmit human capital to their children than comparably educated white parents" (Massey et al., 2003, p. 6). Research linking the disadvantageous effects of low socioeconomic families and student academic achievement should by no means be used as a license for the application of deficit lenses towards African American students' college aspirations. On the contrary, college aspirations are on the minds of African American parents and their children, even when pathways towards accessing college are not always made clear (Auerbach, 2001). This is admirable, considering findings from the State Higher Education Executive Officers (2007) that college access "campaigns lack clear, compelling and frequently repeated messages. . . . Materials for parents and educators are not a high priority" (p. 95).

While state and national campaigns aimed at clarifying and disseminating knowledge about preparing for and accessing college have increased (Lumina Foundation, 2009a, 2009b; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008), the importance of partnering with parents and the communities from which students come remains inadequately addressed. In fact, Tierney's (2002) research served as a reminder that the role of the family in education has changed over time and that minority parent involvement has not always been well received by the education system, as shown through the forced cultural disengagement of Native American

families in the schooling practices of their youth. Tierney revealed, "Even the critically important work of James Coleman (1961), for example, once concluded that as a strategy, the strengthening of the family was a questionable policy" (p. 588). Of the notion of equality of opportunity, Tierney's perception of Coleman's 1961 response was that it "became greater with the weakening of family power [and that] social organizations—such as the school—[should be used to] further the ends of adolescent improvement" (p. 588). Still, parental involvement has become a vital element of the college access pathway, one that contemporary researchers and practitioners seek to expand upon for improvement. Debates of peer effect continue to warrant further research.

The role of peers. Similar to the implications for parental and family involvement, peer influence has been researched for both its utility and its negative influences. Coleman's (as cited in Massey et al., 2003) theory of peer influence viewed "academic inspiration and achievement [as] . . . strongly shaped, especially in adolescence, by social pressures that students encounter in their classrooms" (p. 12).

All too often youth influence upon peers is noted for its potential negative impact. Gang relations, drug use, and poor attitudes towards achievement and the mainstream have been part of the risk association attributed to peer influence (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2002). This is particularly true in the literature surrounding academic achievement and minorities by researchers like Ogbu and Fordham (1986), Steinberg (1986), and Massey and Denton (1993). Hallinan's 1983 work is still used in recent reviews on peer influence (see Massey et al., 2003; Savin- Williams & Berndt, 1990). Peer frameworks describe contextual peer effects, which indicate "social, demographic, or economic composition of a student body," and proximate peer effects refer to those in friendship circles (Massey et al., 2003, p. 12).

According to Massey et al. (2003), "studies of proximate effects generally begin by enumerating the individuals in a person's social network and then consider how their values, beliefs, and aspirations influence the academic aspirations of the student" (p. 12). Recent literature on the topic in education policy appears limited, as aspirations and peer influence are usually coupled within studies on other seemingly related topics like classroom management and school environment, teacher preparation, curriculum studies, and academic achievement research. For this reason, the incorporation of their literature review on peer influence is used more extensively. Massey et al. (2003) reported,

> Contextual peer effects operate through two mechanisms: reference group processes and interpersonal processes. The former occur because other students present in a classroom or school tend to establish group norms, offer concrete role models, and provide a yardstick for social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Kelley, 1967; Merton & Rossi, 1968). Interpersonal processes operate because the values and standards of peers are transmitted interpersonally through specific interactions between individuals within a social environment (Holliman, 1983).
>
> The literature on proximate peer influence contends that proximity is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for interpersonal attractions and, hence influence. When two people are proximate in a social structure, their likelihood of interaction and mutual influence increases.
>
> Research on proximate effects generally compares the attitudes and behaviors of students with those of specific peers and infers influence from observed similarities. Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) for example, delineated three potential sources of interpersonal influence—teacher encouragement, parental encouragement, and friends' college plans—of which they found the latter to be most important. Hallinan (1983) likewise found that students were more likely to go to college, regardless of socio-economic status, and that the strength of the peer effect generally increased from the freshman to the senior year of high school. (p. 12)

Alternating views exists in the literature concerning whether peer influence is a matter of self-selection or continued peer effect. The more recent literature on peer influence attempts to study this. Brown (as cited in Massey et al., 2003) concluded that peer effects are relegated to selection, but Savin-Williams and Berndt (as cited in Massey et al., 2003) found that the influence went beyond selection processes. Racial and cultural patterns may also play a role in whether peer influence is limited to selection, or permeates other group norms. Another widely studied factor is the role of the teacher. I present findings on teachers next.

The role of school teacher. The literature reveals that teachers are not exempt from these biases. Teachers can be very effective in sending nonverbal messages to students about the amount of confidence they have in the students' abilities. For example, not only do teachers call on favorite students more often, they also wait longer for an answer from students they believe know the answer than from those in whom they have little confidence (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b).

Students recognize and respond to these behaviors, even in instances where the actions are subtle. Teachers with limited confidence in a student are more likely give an answer or move to other students (Gandara & Bial, 2001). Limited confidence by the teacher influences the confidence of students regarding their esteem and belief in their own ability to perform academically and socially.

Sprinthall and Oja (1990) used the Rosenthal effect to substantiate the impact of self-perceived academic ability by teacher expectations, attitudes, and beliefs. They stated that this effect indicates "(1) pupils who are expected to do well, tend to show gains; (2) pupils who are not expected to do well tend to do less well . . . [and] (3) pupils who make gains despite expectations to the contrary are regarded negatively by the teacher" (p. 408).

Other forms of teacher influence include the organization of the classroom and instructional design emphasizing narrow dimensions for assessment or peer-based assessments, with limited consideration for the impact of peer influence on student self-esteem and self-concept. Gandara and Bial (2001) determined, "Teachers can play a pivotal role in students' view of their own ability by manipulating organizational features of their classrooms" (p. A-7).

Ballentine and Spade (2004) pointed to Lubeck's 1985 study on the influences of teachers' cultural background on their teaching approaches "by comparing child-rearing strategies of . . . black women teachers at a working class Head Start center and white women teachers in a middle-class preschool" (p. 65). The findings revealed a consistency between cultural background and teaching styles:

> On the one hand, the Head Start teachers, who all lived in extended family situations, worked closely together and reinforced the collective values of the African American culture. On the other hand, the white teachers, who all lived in nuclear families, tended to work alone with the children and to encourage in them the values of individualism and self-expression. Indicating a form of cultural transmission. (Ballentine & Spade, 2004, p. 65)

The role of counselors. In her findings on the impact of cultural awareness and teaching, Delpit (1996) found that another powerful influencer in the schooling category is that of the counselor. The literature looks primarily at counselors in formal school settings. There is clearly a disconnect between the role of high school guidance counselors and students' utilization of their services. In 2007 the Institute for Higher Education Policy released Cunningham, Erisman, and Looney's report on the role of middle school students' parents in supporting student aspirations for college. According to a 2006 joint study by the AdCouncil (2007) and the Lumina Foundation (2007), guidance counselors ranked last at 5%, when respondents where asked whom they found most helpful in assisting with applying to or considering college, behind parents (26%), teachers (22%), self guidance (15%), same age peers (11%), siblings, (7%) and older friends (6%). The literature reveals three major obstacles of counselor influence:

1. Access: students of most public school systems rarely see their counselors outside of general course scheduling, and when they do seek guidance, they are often faced the obstacle of counselors as gatekeepers. The gate-keeping process, whether intentional of not, perpetuates a tracking system that disproportionately impacts African American and other minority students (Gandara, 2002; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Hutchinson & Reagon,1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes, 1995; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Oakes & Wells, 1997; Perna, 2000; Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

2. Quantity: budget cuts, coupled with changing student demographics and profiles, have a severe impact on the availability of counselors as support systems (Delany, 1991; Perna & Swail, 2002; Rosenbaum et al., 1996; TEA, 1997; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006, 2007). In addition, an outdated model of counselor roles does not fit the needs of the contemporary school system.

3. Quality: There is a disconnect between what students face and what counselors need to be skilled at in order to help students navigate schooling and the college access pathway (McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). The financial pressure on school districts often overwhelmed counselors and course schedulers with rudimentary tasks like checking student records and finding student class placement. These pressures resulted in misinformation in the process of course assignments and guidance along the college access path.

Rosenbaum et al. (1996) conducted a study spanning the changing notions of counselors from past reviews of literature and compared it to the more recent attitudes of high school counselors. Rosenbaum et al. found, "Counselors of the 60s and 70s had rather definite ideas about their role as gatekeeper. Their role was to sort and direct students according to the progress and skills that they as counselors believed their students to be making" (p. 261). Their observation was especially true for counselor interaction with working-class students and parents. Rosenbaum et al. (1996) offered,

> Counselors had strong opinions about which students should be in the college preparatory track, sometimes preventing students from moving into this track because of minor blemishes on a student's record (e.g., Cs in typing). Similarly, counselors had strong opinions about which students should apply to college, and they were quite assertive in discouraging some students from applying. Counselors would often tell students that they lacked the ability or skills, or work habits to handle college. They would enforce their assignments by guarding access to college recruiters and would not jeopardize their

> relationships with recruiters by recommending a student about whom they had doubts. (p. 261)

Counselors' active gate-keeping strategies against students are highly problematic, but especially considering the context of today's weak college access pipeline and prevalent racial achievement gaps. The Rosenbaum et al. (1996) study not only highlighted the counselor contributions towards student disengagement, but also revealed that presence of another opportunity blocking technique—intentional vagueness that the literature referred to as a "cooling out" function:

> When students or parents refused to abide by the counselors' advice and insisted on aiming for college, the counselors would provide vague inadequate information that would give the student the impression that college was a possibility, when actually it was not. (Rosenbaum et al., 1996, p. 261)

The literature indicates a shift from active gate-keeping among counselors to minor influencers of students' pathway decisions. Delany (1991) attributed the shift in power in part from the state and local control over academic trajectories and from increasing parental input. Rosenbaum et al. (1996) cited Wilson and Rossman's 1993 findings that counselors see their decreased roles as "little more than scheduling, monitoring, and paper pushing" (p. 261). This does not diminish the presence of tracking and sorting systems that are still present, as reported by Valenzuela (1999), Oakes (1985, 1986), and others. Rosenbaum et al. (1996) interviewed 27 counselors from eight high schools and found "that counselors do not like giving students bad news about their future prospects, do not want the responsibility, and do not believe that they have the authority to do it" (p. 257).

This sense of sensitive apathy may come from the pressures and professional displacement of counselor roles in the public schools, and it truly problematizes the college pathway process and prospects for successful academic achievement by minority and low-income students who do not have the alternative resources to assist them. I interviewed counselors who worked within the high schools of the student participants and counselors affiliated with the university-sponsored outreach program as supplemental research, not included in the findings of this study. The nonschool counselor interviews indicated some differences in their experiences compared to school counselors, not shared in the dissertation. Having presented a roadmap for understanding limitations in the literature, from which the value of aspirations has been proposed, and a revisit of how the literature discusses the roles of student assets, parent,

peer, teacher, and counselor, I now turn to the literature to understand how supplemental spaces are intended to build the capacity of youth. In the next section, I present findings from the literature about CAPs as capacity-building spaces.

Section 3: CAPs

Counseling Students Into College

There is increasing literature that supports the role of supplemental educational spaces as positive influences on students academic achievement and social development Checkoway et al., 2005; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2002; Checkoway et al., 2003; Deutsch, 2008; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005; Gordon & Brigdall, 2007; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Noguera & Wing, 2006). An integral part of CAPs is a major counseling component. Generally smaller in size, located within or outside of traditional school environments, their services provide much-needed support and enrichment to students. In their survey of existing U.S. CAPs, Gandara and Bial (2001) outlined the role and utility of CAP counseling components:

> The majority of the pipeline programs in this report invest time and effort in counseling their student participants. The goal behind the counseling efforts is the same for most initiatives: to provide students with direct access to information so that they may attend college. Programs employ a number of strategies in order to disseminate college information and advising. Some offer individual consultations with students to help them better understand the college search and application process. Others employ peer, staff or college representatives who speak with groups of students about college opportunities and campus life in a workshop or classroom setting. Several programs offer assistance with financial aid forms and college applications. For many students, these forms, which sometimes seem overwhelming, can become a significant barrier to attending college. (p.4)

This purposeful, strategic approach to counseling includes a narrowly defined goal, providing an opportunity for impact that is much improved over the state of public school counseling. Gandara and Bial (2001) noted that counseling efforts can be coupled with other strategies, but the focus remains the provision of information for accessing college. A review of the other services and strategies used by CAPs is addressed in the following section on the capacity-building mechanism of CAPs.

Building Student Capacity

CAPs come in a variety of program types with provisions that positively account for many of the obstacles to learning indicated in the literature. For example, the Posse program is a

cohort-based CAP that involves a graduate mentor who attends the same university as the cohort he or she mentors. In addition, Posse partners with institutions of higher education that are committed to the 4-year relationship with students. In turn, the Posse members serve as campus-based diversity ambassadors. The cohort component speaks to the literature on peer influence, offering a positively approach. The graduate mentor addresses the literature on role models, and by serving as proponents of diversity, the Posse program allows for students to express and develop their leadership styles.

Of course, Posse is only one of several types of approaches regarding CAPs. Gandara and Bial (2001) illustrated types of programs including private nonprofits, university or college-related programs identified as K–16 initiatives, government-sponsored programs, community-based programs, and K–12 centered CAPs.

The literature indicates that impediments to accessing college come in a variety of forms: inequality of resources regarding the college preparation and access process, inequalities in access to social and other forms of capital related to college success, racism, a lack of peer support, poor schooling environment and counseling, financial barriers, and low expectations for minority and low-income students (Achieve, 2006, 2009; Gandara, 2002; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Haycock, 1998). Considering that Texas and its peer states (Florida and California, for example) are endeavoring to make college access via the K–16 pipeline statewide goals, it is useful to consider the challenges surrounding students like those I interviewed for this dissertation.

According to national statistics compiled by the Alliance for Educational Excellence (2006), over 1 million students will enter ninth grade but will not receive a degree 4 years later. The organization expected 7,000 students to drop out of the K–12 system daily. Barrow and Rouse (2005) reported that approximately missions of students failed to graduate from high school. Greene and Winters (2006) found that while approximately 70% percent of students graduate from high school, African American and Hispanic students have a 55% percent chance or less of finishing high school with a regular diploma. Nationally, dropouts from the class of 2004 cost the nation more than $325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes.

The Education Trust (2008, 2009) estimated that increasing African American and Latino student graduation rates to that of their White peers would result in 37,000 additional minority

students who graduate from high school. Moreover, Balfanz and Legters (2004) estimated that 2,000 U.S. high schools produce nearly half of the nation's dropouts, and the number of seniors in these high schools is consistently 60% or less than the number of ninth graders 4 years earlier. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2006) estimated that a 5% increase in male high school graduation rates would save the nation almost $5 billion in cost associated with incarceration; 75% of state prison inmates did not complete high school.

The situation for Texas looms just as large. The Intercultural Development Research Association12-year study on Texas dropouts (Supik & Johnson, 1999) found discrepancies in the reported numbers from the Texas Education Agency, reflecting that the 1994 dropout rate was twice as high as originally reported: "More than 100,000 Texas youth did not receive their high school diplomas, yet were not counted as dropouts." Among their recommendations for change, Supik and Johnson called for counselor support and training, increased parental involvement, and continued ethnographic studies. To this end, CAPs, which may reach students in other, more conducive ways (Gandara, 2002), may serve as models for success among this silenced population.

Although assessment data on CAPs is limited, their efforts provide a valuable opportunity via guidance, information, and support to students along the college access process. Texas is among a growing number of states enlisting a host of college access approaches in order to increase the number of students entering into higher education.

Thus far, in this chapter, I have presented former theoretical explanations for low performance of African Americans, limitations of the theories, and an alternative theory that articulates school inequalities as an outcome of racialized treatment of minority youth. I also presented supporting literature that explored the role of identity development among African American youth; relational development; and how care, respect, and trust between adults and youth affected student achievement. In the second section of this chapter, I described limitations of the current literature's terminology to specify the unique positions of external influencers and internal influencers, which allowed aspirations to be centered as an intrinsic resource related to capacity-building achievement and, by extension, college access. Section 3 was dedicated to the role of CAPs as capacity-building support for college-aspiring youth. Next, I describe my use of CRT, described in chapter 1, as a frame to guide my study.

Section 4: CRT in Education

Race and Academic Performance

Thus far, an examination of the literature on influencers and CAPs described perspectives that are generally identified as aspirations but are rather about their impact on aspirations. The literature on intrinsic aspirations and its import is scarce in educational studies, a likely result of the presumption of its necessity (to some degree, albeit limited) but also due to an emphasis on accountability and inquiry about the racial achievement gap.

As researchers seek to understand the academic achievement gap, I contend that theories hold deficit-based underpinnings about minority achievement and preparation for college, particularly regarding the explanations surrounding poor self-concept or disidentification, as found in Steele and Aronson's (1998) stereotype threat; peer-based antiestablishment behavior found in Ogbu and Fordham's (1986) theory on oppositional culture; and race-based, innate academic inability (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). These theories implicate a reciprocal relationship between the minority poor's choices (or lack thereof), agency, resources, home, and community support (Massey et al., 2003). Tighter definitions, such as the specification of external and internal influencers (aspirations) are necessary to explain connection between mean and ends. Bernstein (as cited in Ballentine & Spade, 2004) delineated between disadvantage and deficiencies, stating the classification of working-class sociolinguistic patterns as restricted codes is "functionally related to the social division of labor, where context-dependent language is necessary in the context of production" (p. 12). Ballentine and Spade (2004) argued that according to Bernstein, differing values of the middle class, while necessary within their context, are mirrored in schooling systems, placing working-class youth at a disadvantage. From such a perspective, the delineation between the terms *disadvantage* and *deficiency* may provide a useful application for a reframed perspective of the more prevalent explanations on minority underachievement.

The literature regarding blocked opportunities to learning encompasses much of the same theories found in the literature studying the nature of minority student achievement gaps. Even with these diverse theoretical offerings related to the coping skills of the individual or peer effects, race continues to be an essential factor in the lives of minorities, especially African Americans. I propose that one reason the academic achievement gap continues to perplex educators is because researchers continue to engage theories that focus on the disadvantaged

group or individual rather than on the deeply entrenched racial norms and repercussions of the country's racial heritage. This heritage is embodied in the structural DNA of society. Schools, as a microcosm of society, naturally perpetuate the stratification of members as a sorting system for the larger society. This is particularly true in the case of African Americans. Fifty years after the legal dismantling of American segregationist practices, critical theorists argue that the structural elements of racism are entrenched in society and, as such, in school systems (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

CRT, first developed within legal scholarship in response to the absence of narrative-centered approaches, was introduced into educational scholarship through Ladson-Billings (1995b, 1998). Ladson-Billings articulated the use of CRT to situate race back into the center of the discourse over minorities and schooling. In her 1998 article, Ladson-Billings identified the guiding principles of CRT, including the centrality of race as normal in America; storytelling as an essential element for analysis related to American ideology and as a necessary tool of critique of liberalism's slow efforts towards change; and the proposition that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation.

In her presidential address at the American Educational Research Association, Ladson-Billings (2006) offered that the current challenges facing U.S. public schools stems from a historical accumulation of disadvantage experienced by African Americans and other racial minorities. She offered that contemporary preoccupation over accountability standards, curriculum reform, and the ever-looming racial achievement gap can be drawn directly from the persistent, ongoing, intentional miseducation of minorities from this country's genesis (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Her insight was well received, signaling perhaps that a return to an educational discourse on race and social stratification has arrived.

However, I am reminded of my attendance at a qualitative methods workshop where J. Fields (personal communication, March, 2009) attributed the tension surrounding research on race as an outcome of associating race as a variable rather than an experience. The professor was talking in terms of the field of sociology, but I would extend that perspective to education and most other social science and humanities research fields. This is similar to the critiques offered by founders of the CRT movement, including Bell's (2005) critique that critical legal theory and the law could not aptly address issues because of avoidance of discussing race and racialized experiences of people and systems. CRT in education offers a tool by which researchers are able

to investigate and challenge the relationships among schools, society, and the students served by schools. Sociologists of education view critical theories as a subset of interpretive approaches that examine the actual actors (students, for example) in the school system. They offer a critique that allows for the incorporation of macro and micro investigation (Ballentine & Spade, 2004).

CRT in Education

CRT is a theory of action that "challenges conventional accounts of race in education and other institutions and the social processes that occur within them" (Powers, 2007, p. 151). Derived in response to a void in language to address "race- based systematic critique of legal reasoning" (Powers, 2007, p. 152) and the slow pace of its Critical Legal Studies predecessor (Crenshaw et al., 1995), critical race theorists went beyond contemplation on societal ideology to form an "activist agenda" (Powers, 2007, p. 151). CRT is a liberating theory (hooks, 1994). It is used to examine structural elements surrounding race and power by naming, exploring, and articulating practices for action. Although created out of the legal scholarship, the theory can be applied to a domestic and international disciplines such as sociology, women's studies, history, ethnic studies, and healthcare.

CRT in education can be identified by its recognition that (a) racism is endemic to American life, emphasizing the centrality of race to the phenomena under study; (b) narratives are a legitimate form of knowledge that gives voice to the marginalized; (c) the experiences of the oppressed or marginalized should be known; and (d) racial history must be confronted, analyzed, and addressed (Bell, 1992; Delgado and Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn, 2004, 2006; Lynn& Parker, 2006; Lynn & Villalpando, 2007). CRT in education uses five tenets to inform research, policy, and practice that some refer to as critical race methodology (Solorzano & Villipando, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005):

1. The first of these tenets is the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordinated fields like gender and class (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Russell, 1992).

2. CRT or CRM is used to challenge dominant ideology that privileges Whites and asserts institutional objectivity in education. Ladson-Billings (2000) used CRT to challenge the idea of race-neutral research and expose how deficit-based research ignores the voices and experiences of racial minorities and inflicts "damaging 'official knowledge'" (Powers, 2007). The work of Apple (2000), Delgado and Stefanic (2001) and Harris (2001) made similar connections between knowledge, power and its influence concerning people of color.

3. CRT is steeped in tradition committing it to social justice (Bell, 1987; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001a, 2001b).

4. The centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color and the use of storytelling or narratives to convey those experiences are important, whether they are the author's experiences, that of another person, or a composite narrative (Bell, 1987, 1992, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

5. The final tenet is use of a transdisciplinary perspective to name and analyze the roles of race and power (Solorzano &Yosso).

A potential contribution of this study was to reframe how education policy engages college access for African American students. The application of CRT provided a theoretical tool for challenging the tradition of deficit-based perceptions of minority student achievement (Lynn, 2004, 2006; Lynn& Parker, 2006; Lynn & Villalpando, 2007). The focus of CRT on experiential knowledge of people of color and its promotion of the authenticity of narrative research strategies made CRT a particularly strong choice. Yosso (2005) argued, "Contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking," which "takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance "(p. 75). As a binding factor of the CRT paradigm, "naming racism" (Solozano & Yosso, 2002) revealed the "injuries" inflicted by racism (p. 27). Yosso (2002) stated that deficit thinking blames minority students and families by believing that

> (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education. These racialized assumptions about Communities of Color most often lead schools to deficit thinking. . . . As a result, schooling efforts usually aim to fill up supposedly passive students with forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society. (p. 75)

The deficit-based assumption that schools work and that minority students and their families must learn to adjust or assimilate stems from "overgeneralizations about family" and student "background that are exacerbated by a limited framework to interpret how individual views . . . educational success" (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 159). CRT, with its attention to narratives and the experience of the oppressed, was a choice tool for this study.

Minority students possess an arsenal of complex desires, skills, and strategies; one of these strategies is their intrinsic drive for achievement. This drive, identified in this study as *aspirations*, constitutes a form of personal capital. Yet, there has been little emphasis in the educational literature in terms of the role of aspirations as a form of personal capital in accessing

college. Greeno (2007) and Gordon (2007) referred to personal capital in their work on the affirmative development of youth. Yosso (2005) identified personal aspirations as a legitimate form of capital in her conceptualization of cultural wealth.

CRT Interpreting and Sense-Making Through Narratives

Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) said, "Interpretation is central to adolescence. . . . By the beginning of the teen years, most adolescents possess the skills necessary to interpret their worlds" (p. 2). In order to explore student interpretations of their experiences, that is, their perspectives on the relationship between their aspirations, capacity-building support systems, and academic and social development, I used interviews to obtain the narratives of the student participants. The interviews were explored using a process of narrative inquiry to investigate and report the findings regarding sense-making that the students engaged in as they shared their stories. Narrative inquiry refers to a line of research that studies "how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience" (Moen, 2006, p. 2). Despite some debate over whether this line of inquiry is indicative of a theory or method (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gudmunsdottir, 1997, 2001; Moen, 2006), Moen made the case for narrative inquiry as both a "frame or reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study" (p. 2).

Similarly, CRT holds that the use of storytelling is essential because it places the voice of the marginalized up front. It tells the story of the *other*, those whom Bell (1992) described as the faces "at the bottom of society's well" (p. vi). In the case of this study, the African American high school students represented the other. Narrative inquiry's design served as a complementary method to the CRT frame used in this dissertation.

Racism impacts African Americans despite their differing social class affiliations (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). Gathering students' experiences places a human sentiment to an often objective, context-neutral, culturally irrelevant research and policy agenda. This has particularly important implications for educational research policy, since "educational marginalization is justified through research that de-centers and even dismisses communities of color—through majoritarian storytelling" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

Critical race theorists constantly must challenge epistemologies of the privileged racial majority. Some researchers question the legitimacy of perceived race-neutral epistemologies

(Scheurich & Young, 1997). Critical race theorists seek to center the marginalized perspective, a process that involves constant assessment regarding the nature of privileged epistemologies, research methods, and resulting social-economic, political, and educational policies.

Storytelling has a long tradition in the African American culture (Bell, 1987, 1992, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). As such, narrative inquiry offered an appropriate form of data collection and description among participants who may already utilize this approach in their own lives. While collecting narratives as a form of qualitative inquiry (via the interview) is not exactly the same as an informal conversation, it offers a similar approach that may be more intuitive for the selected participants.

In this dissertation CRT was used to frame my methodological approach, resulting in the use of narratives that center the student experiences as assets rather than deficits. Student aspirations are situated as an important form of personal capital and as an important foundational element to be considered in education policy for minority youth aspiring to access college. CRT, because of its focus on voice, experience, and the use of storytelling, was an appropriate frame for developing counternarratives of African American students' experiences about their aspirations, capacity-building systems, and academic and social development, from the perspectives of the students themselves.

Conclusion: Pulling It All Together

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature's explanation of differences in achievement between Black and White students. The focus of the prevailing four theories all undertake deficit responses that fault African American students, parents, and communities. Intangible resources like agency and support are also marginalized within a deficit theoretical frame. Even as newer theories emerge that hold racially induced school inequalities responsible, there have been few attempts to ascertain the causes and aggravators of these settings from the very youth who navigate unequal settings. I have attempted to lay out this chapter in a manner that identifies and defines the problem of racism in connection to college access for African American students. I began by defining how the literature on African American academic performance was theorized along race-deficit lines. I provided an alternative theory that led to the review of literature describing the importance of relational development based on care, trust, and respect between adults and youth. I then described limits in the literature's current terminology and offered aspirations as a potentially important intrinsic, intangible resource for African American

achievement. I discussed what the literature had to offer about the potential role of supplemental support programs like CAPs as a capacity-building system for developing youth. This finding in the literature is important because it points to an intentional space where effective practices occur. CRT as a frame for this dissertation permitted the use of youth narratives to obtain a new perspective of student experiences in school and in terms of accessing college. From these narratives, insight about strategies for improving African American achievement and, by extension, access to college could occur. This approach poses potential factors to consider in building a solution.

We know from the literature that poor performance in high school precludes access to college. We know from examining the literature on causes of underperformance that these explanations have represented race-deficit genetic, sociocultural, and sociological explanations of African Americans and school achievement. In the dissertation presented, readers are introduced to 7 African American high school students, whose narratives shed light on what the literature has offered and how this affects their access to college. I provide a description of the methodology used to implement this dissertation in chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I present an overview of qualitative research as inquiry and I present the method, theoretical frame, and design used in this dissertation. The chapter layout is as follows. I begin with a recap of what was covered in chapters 1 and 2. Subsequently, I present the focus of the dissertation and the research questions that guided my inquiry. Next, I discuss the use of qualitative research and its three associated approaches, (a) description, (b) analysis, and (c) interpretation. Although I define all three, I detail two specific qualitative approaches (description and interpretation) used to present and make sense of the data in this dissertation. I describe the descriptive and interpretive processes, explain different methods for their use, and identify strategies I employed in chapters 4 and 5 to present the data findings and interpretation.

Next, I discuss CRT as a frame for this dissertation. Specifically, I define CRT, present its common tenets, and articulate its two most prominent values: race and voice. I described how these two CRT values were particularly useful for exploring the marginalized educational contexts identified in this dissertation. I then discuss narrative research, also called narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry served as a complementary method of the CRT theoretical frame in my dissertation. Whereas CRT served as a theoretical frame to identify and discuss race and voice in this exploration, narrative inquiry moved CRT from theory to method and provided a tool for description and interpretation of the data, in line with qualitative research approaches. I define narrative inquiry and explain how narrative inquiry has been used and how it complements CRT (e.g., voice, storytelling and the African American oral tradition).

After presenting qualitative research, CRT as a frame, and narrative inquiry as a CRT method, I describe the design of the study in terms of the participants, location, data collection, and my process for analyzing the data. In this section, I also address limitations and special considerations associated with this type of study. In the conclusion of this chapter, I recap what was presented and turn to chapter 4, which presents data findings in a narrative descriptive format. I begin chapter 4 with a description of this format, a process that I identify as *public sense-making*. Public sense-making influenced my choice of narrative format style (using extended block quotes) to present the findings and is supported by Wolcott (1994) as a qualitative approach for organizing data.

Recapping Chapters 1 and 2

By the year 2015, states across the nation expect to dramatically increase their college-going population (Lumina Foundation, 2009a, 2009b). To accomplish this, there has been a push to increase the college access rates of racial minorities. As described in chapter 1, making the connection between high school and college remains difficult for minority students like African Americans, whose achievement rates in high school and college admissions lag behind their White peer group. A P–20 connection makes clear that failure to obtain a high school diploma that prepares students for college-level work indicates negative outcomes for the United States as a whole. Chapter 2 of this dissertation presented research on the four prevailing theories for the achievement gap: (a) genetic deficiency, (b) sociocultural poverty, (c) low teacher expectations, and (d) student oppositional identity. These are all privileged, deficit explanations that blame African American students, their families, and their peers for low performance.

An emerging theory that holds schools responsible for structural inequalities that differentiate treatment of students by race was presented. I identified supporting literature that described the importance of relational development for African American youth, centering positive adult–student reciprocity as essential to student development. Relationship reciprocity was described in the literature as requiring care, trust, and respect. Missing from the discourse have been empirical studies that center student perspectives as a valid form of inquiry and interpretation about their educational experiences and outcomes. This dissertation sought to address the gap. I explored the relationships among student aspirations, capacity-building systems of support and intervention, and academic and social development from the perspective of 7 African American high school students. I explored two research questions aimed at understanding this relationship:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems (supports and intervention)?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

Having presented a description of the problem and relevant literature, this chapter explores the method, theory, and design used to understand the phenomenon as articulated in the research questions that guided the dissertation. Because of the focus of this study and the nature

of the questions guiding it, a qualitative research process was selected as the appropriate method of research. The next section presents an overview of qualitative research as inquiry.

Qualitative Research as Inquiry

Framing Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research is often described as a process of inquiry (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Snape & Spencer, 2003; Wolcott, 1994). Qualitative inquiry has been used as an "overarching category covering a wide range of approaches and methods found within different research disciplines" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p.3). Wolcott stated, "Qualitative approaches allow far broader scope in what we recognize among the issues we address and what we draw upon as data in addressing them" (p. 4). The relationship between means and ends is important to understanding qualitative research. Wolcott explained, "The same data can have quite different meanings and uses for researchers of different persuasions" (p. 4). To account for variability, Wolcott preferred the term *qualitative inquiry*. Some researchers identify qualitative research by methodological techniques undertaken for collecting data, such as in-depth interviewing, narratives, and observational methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Merriam (2002) described qualitative research as seeking to understand the social world as constructed by individuals who interact within that world. Meanings are derived from the construction of multiple realities and interpretations that change with time. Qualitative researchers attempt to understand a snapshot of the experience, that is, to understand "how individuals experience and interact with their social world, [and] the meaning it has for them is considered an *interpretive* qualitative approach" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Approaches to qualitative studies include critical (the impact of larger contextual factors), and postmodern (the questioning of the construction and organization of reality) forms of qualitative theoretical perspectives. I used a critically interpretive qualitative approach for this study.

Four Tenets of Qualitative Inquiry

While the qualitative research field continues to emerge among essential tensions, hesitations, and contradictions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), a common set of techniques is identifiable with the paradigm. According to Snape and Spencer (2003), these common identifiers include "the use of samples that are small in scale and purposively selected on the basis of salient criteria" (p. 5); data collection methods that entail close contact and interaction

between the researcher and research participants; detailed, information-rich data; analyses designed to uncover emergent concepts; and outputs that focus on the interpretation of social meaning by the research participant.

One tenet of qualitative research maintains that the view of reality (ontology) consists of multiple constructions that are to be studied holistically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985), when considering the various ontological approaches of reality, opted for constructed reality and provided examples of its application to understanding truth:

> For example, consider labels, euphemisms, and stereotypes. Euphemisms construct reality in ways that make it more palatable. Stereotypes construct reality so as to make it easy to deal with, and in order to create quick reference points for categorization. Labels help us sort reality easily. (p. 88)

An underlying assumption within these scholars' argument is that meaning for one individual is not guaranteed to be the same as that for the next individual, because the lens through which they perceived and interpreted their experiences may be different. The interpretation of reality as a construction rather than a creation or perception offers a multiplicity of truth. For each participant included in this dissertation, I anticipated that individual experiences would shape each person's perspectives on aspirations and college access. Similarities in their overall viewpoints emerged as the data were triangulated, but the notion of truth remained a unique interpretation for each student's narrative. However, one limit of the mulitiplicity in constructionist perspectives is that it risks not making a definitive call on structural issues that affect marginalized people. The presence of race as a larger, contextual factor in the experiences of the African America students otherwise might be lost in a discourse that debates the validity of racialized experiences. For example, what counts as a racialized experience is perceived differently by Blacks and Whites. One of the problems with the advancement of research theories to fully explain achievement gaps stems from varying notions of which variables are "more" important. Social class, for example, often serves as a proxy in research investigations because race remains a contested factor; its import and presence are regularly challenged. For this reason, I used a CRT lens to assist in my interpretation of the data as provided by the student narratives in this dissertation.

A second tenet of qualitative research involves the relationship between the knower and the known (epistemology) and the influence that occurs between the researcher and the

researched, particularly when the researcher is the primary tool for data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Rather than the strict objectivity espoused by quantitative researchers in distancing the phenomenon under investigation from the researcher, qualitative researchers understand that the process of being studied affects research participants. Variations concerning how to address this interaction include the use of "empathetic neutrality," which recognizes the impossibility of value-free research but advocates for transparent assumptions (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 13). As the researcher, I sought to address this concern by articulating my own experiences and values as a female researcher of color as I developed a rapport with the research participants. I also describe my position as the researcher in chapter 5 of this dissertation. During the interview process of this dissertation, I recognized that although sharing my similarities with the participants during our introduction together was a viable method for establishing rapport, the voices of the students were of utmost importance. Thus, I attempted to limit (not erase) the impact of my personal and academic views during the interview process in which the students discussed their experiences. During the interview process, my facilitator role was to listen, ask questions, and probe for clarification or follow-up when needed. During the analysis, I coded and unitized the data and developed themes using a CRT framework, resulting in an interpretive analysis of the student narratives. In line with Solorzano and Yosso's (2002) articulation of the CRT frame in qualitative research, CRT enabled me to identify and frame the phenomenon of racism in education to develop an initial set of theoretical premises (refer to Figure 5.2 in chapter 5), and to develop the research questions that guided this dissertation. I describe my process in a later section on the design of the study.

A third tenet of qualitative research examines the generalization of research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described generalizations as "context free assertions that are pertaining to, affecting, or applicable to each and all of a class, kind, or order" (p. 111). The original rejection of the applicability of generalizations to qualitative studies was positioned in the belief by some social scientists that generalizations should be the dominant goal of scientific inquiry. As such, goals of inquiry seeking something other than generalizations were viewed as useless. Others argued that the ability to generalize within qualitative research is undergirded by the difference in purpose between quantitative and qualitative research. Williams (2002) posed,

> An ideographic discipline concerns itself with the understanding of an instance in a unique context . . . intended as a unique appreciation of the moment . . . an interpretation by a situated agent (the researcher) of a never to be repeated event or setting.

> . . . It follows from this that particulars of such accounts of the social world cannot therefore be generalized to other instances. (p. 125)

Williams (2002) also noted that use of interpretive research "in the form of focus groups or in-depth interviews" can be used to "provide . . . evidence in the creation of local or national policy" (p. 125). This dissertation, which explored African American student perspectives on the relationship between their college aspirations, capacity-building systems (support and interventions), and academic and social development, does just that. It was my intention to use the research findings and their implications for the knowledge benefit of educators and policymakers working with or for the students in this study. My research was bounded, being conducted within a particular setting, at a specific period, impacted by political and social occurrences of its time period. I recognized that the findings of my study reflected the unique circumstances of my research participants. Yet, another objective of this work was to provide educators, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with findings to build upon and continue this research trajectory and policy development for improving the educational disparities of African American students.

Where generalizations are contested conditions in qualitative research, Wolcott (1994) contended that the use of *inference i*n qualitative studies is not baseless, also described as "inductive reasoning . . . where the conclusion goes beyond the content of the premises" (p. 40). This is particularly relevant to studies that seek to explore the unchartered boundaries of research data, of which traditional analysis presents fixed findings. Flyvberg's (2006) examination of the misunderstandings and varied perspectives of the use of the case study speaks directly to the question about using generalizations in qualitative research. He demonstrated the use of single cases to advance scientific progress through the careful selection of experiments by which scientific dispositions could be refuted. Williams (2002) argued that whether explicit or not, qualitative researchers do generalize, though they may "deny it" (p. 126) or the application of its use. Williams (2002) attributed this denial to "a narrow definition of what it means to generalize" (p. 126).

Regarding generalization's role in this dissertation, the question must be asked: From the stories of my participants, what can be learned to support future efforts of similar constituents? Any generalizations made from this qualitative study belie understanding concepts—broad

frameworks, rather than the specific application of a finding—to other students who may share similar characteristics to the participants involved in this dissertation.

A fourth tenet of qualitative research is that it is descriptive and takes place in natural settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Findings that develop from their natural contexts and are therefore rich in detail contribute to a more refined understanding of the phenomena experienced by the participant (Merriam, 2002). In keeping with the naturalistic context, my study took place in local community settings: the outreach center and local libraries of the participants' neighborhoods. By interviewing and observing the students in their natural settings, I sought to understand the processes and meaning of the experiences that they shared in a format that allowed them to feel more comfortable in the interview process (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Three Approaches for Organizing Qualitative Research Data

Wolcott (1994) suggested that the question of what to do with data can be an overwhelming process for novice researchers. He identified three primary approaches to organizing and making sense of the data: (a) description, (b) analysis, and (c) interpretation. Description "renders an account by staying close to the data as originally recorded" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12). Wolcott explained, "Description addresses the question, 'What is going on here?' Data consists of observations made by the researcher and/or reported to the researcher by others" (p. 12). Analysis

> addresses the identification of essential features and the systemic description of interrelationships among them—in short, how things work. In terms of state objectives, analysis also may be employed evaluatively to address questions of why a system is not working or how it might be made to work better. (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12)

Interpretation addresses context and meaning, answering questions like, "What does it all mean? What is to be made of it all?" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12).

Although the terms are sometimes combined or used interchangeably, identifying and distinguishing between the approaches for addressing data depends upon researchers' "varying emphases" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 11). Because of my interest in understanding African American student perspectives, I chose to employ description and interpretation to organize and make sense of the data and findings presented in this dissertation. Next, I provide a broader account of description and interpretation, specifically, what it is, how it is defined, and ways to organize each approach.

Description. Description is about the story, the account of an experience or phenomenon. Wolcott (1994) said that the objective is to "tell the story. Then tell how that happened to be the way you told it to be" (p. 16). Wolcott identified 10 descriptive approaches for organizing the data:

1. Relate events by chronological order.

2. Present data according to researcher or narrator order, attending to how a story has been revealed to the researcher.

3. Another approach, progressive focusing, or the revealing of an account, occurs "from the broad particulars of the case, or starting in with a close-in view and gradually backing away to include more context" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 18).

4. In day-in-the-life descriptions, real accounts are played out step by step or as reconstructions of real-life events.

5. Critical or key events are descriptions that "focus on only one or two aspects, creating a story-within-a-story in which the essence (but not the detail) of the whole is revealed or reflected in microcosm" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 19).

6. Plot and characters center specific characters as a descriptive approach to qualitative data.

7. Another method, groups in interaction, relies on collective identities similar to that of plot and character descriptions.

8. Having an analytical framework in mind while collecting data helps to provide a structure for organizing and interpreting the data.

9. The Rashoman effect describes a descriptive account as told "through the eyes of different participants" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 22).

10. Finally, Wolcott (1994) advocated for writing mystery as a description where a problem is to be solved.

Interpretation. Wolcott (1994) claimed, "Interpretation marks a threshold in thinking and writing at which the research transcends factual data and cautious analysis" (p. 36). Interpretation serves as the "pivotal base on which all else hinges, but it is the researcher who decides how the description is to be played out" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 36). The interaction between interpretation and description suggests a relationship, unified through the position of the researcher, the persons or things under exploration, and the presentation of the findings. In

chapter 5, I discuss the relationship between narrative description and interpretation as a process that I call *public sense-making.* Wolcott (1994) identified 11 ways to accomplish interpretation in research:

1. Extend the analysis, which facilitates "*pointing the way* rather than *leading the way*" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 40) by noting influences or implications of data.

2. Mark and then make the leap, drawing inferences beyond the official scope of the data.

3. When new interpretations can no longer be well supported, stop.

4. Do as directed in providing or subtracting from the interpretations.

5. By extension, Wolcott (1994) stated that following suggestions by colleagues and critical friends of the research is another way to think about how to conduct interpretation.

6. Use theory to connect cases or the data with larger issues.

7. Refocus interpretation to develop a framework and center the interpretation of the data and findings.

8. Connect with personal experience. This form of interpretation, identified as "I-Witnessing" (Wolcott, 1994) centers personal reflection as both accepted and expected in contemporary qualitative research. Connecting with personal experience in interpretation explains, "This is what I make of it all" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 44).

9. Analyzing the interpretive process provides a clearer sense of the problem.

10. Interpreting the analytical process shows how data findings connect or support popular views.

11. Finally, Wolcott (1994) described exploring alternative formats like composite counternarratives as creative approaches for the interpretation of data and findings.

Having presented ways to use description and interpretation, I identify which of these data organizing techniques related to the actual approach used in this dissertation. I must disclose that I discovered Wolcott's (1994) specific tools for organizing data *after* having organized and made sense of my own data. However, I found Wolcott's work beneficial and supportive of the approach that I did use, narrative description. Table 3.1 identifies which of his approaches appeared relevant to this dissertation.

Table 3.1

Identification of Descriptive and Interpretive Organization of Data

Organizing approach	Explanation
Description	
Researcher or narrator order	Organizes ways to relate to events through narrative; works well for story-telling or the development of one's "own theory
Critical or key event	Focuses one or two aspects; tells the story-within-the-story, in which the essence of the whole is revealed or reflected in the microcosm
Interpretation	
Extend the analysis	Might leave reader with questions that convey against accepting overly simplistic explanations of complex social phenomena
Mark, and make the leap	Inductive reasoning or strong influence from the known to the unknown (e.g., aspirations as intrinsic drive and intangible resources)
Connect with personal experience	"I-Witnessing" or personal reflection. Interpretive option: "This is what I make of it all."
Explore alternative formats	Includes explorations of personal feelings and beliefs

In chapter 4 I used narrative description that consisted of extended block quotes. I described the process as a public display of the data. In chapter 5, I used an interpretive method to interpret my dissertation findings.

Limitations. Limitations exist for both description and interpretation. Limitations of descriptions deal with how one "grounds" the account provided; checking for information will provide full or rich accounts for sense-making of the data. Some of the limitations of interpretation included being vulnerable to excesses—that is, interpreting too much or too little and temptations to reach beyond the scope of the study. One overall limitation of Wolcott's (1994) description of qualitative research methods for organizing the data is that, while systematic (and therefore useful for linear instruction), it appears to conform to the objective

standards of quantitative research values. Wolcott's voice appeared to favor analysis over description or interpretation, perhaps because it more closely resembles objective empirical methods. Like the debate over preferences for quantitative or qualitative research, data organizing should be rooted in the objectives of the study and the questions that facilitate learning about the objective. While validity is important, so is authenticity.

Madison's (2005) work on critical ethnography presented *qualitative research as performance*. Madison described the reciprocity between theory and method on one end and between the researcher and participant on the other end. For example, by "performance," Madison situated the researcher's role "as the transmitter of information and the skilled interpreter in both presenting and representing the lives and stories of others whom have come to know and who have given you, the researcher, permission to reveal their stories" (p. 4).

Madison's (2005) approach accounts for the relationship between the researcher, the research participant, and that person's story or narrative. Positionality is both important and influential. Madison's approach to qualitative research (through critical ethnography) answers the critiques identified in Wolcott's (1994) description of limitations of organizing qualitative research. Madison's framing of qualitative research works in tandem with CRT and with narrative inquiry as method. I elaborate more on this in the section about CRT and narrative inquiry and in chapter 5, when I discuss my position as author.

Returning to Wolcott's (1994) perspective on data organizing, another distinction between interpretation and analysis is that "interpretation is more subtle than analysis" (p. 36). Wolcott also noted that time was an important element of interpretation:

> Time itself fosters the seasoning both of the data and of the individual who gathered them. In about the same number of years that it takes for the award of promotion and tenure, for example, and academic researcher might be ready to offer a provocative interpretation for a dissertation study completed several years earlier (p. 39)

Wolcott (1994) also presented a refreshingly honest and insightful observation relating to the politics and time limitations of interpretation. On the basis of judging the adequacy of interpretation, Wolcott noted that it "tends to shift subtly from interpretations themselves to the status and persona of the interpreter. Careers are oriented accordingly. Beginning researchers are expected to offer detailed accounts and may be discouraged from offering much in the way of interpretation" (p. 38). Despite limitations, Wolcott advocated for the role of qualitative researchers as storytellers and "building the case" regarding their line of inquiry (p. 17)

The presence of political distractions in research exemplifies "majoritarian" perspectives that Solorzano and Yosso (2002) warned against. In their research on the role of CRT as a liberating frame, CRT grounded the experiences of the marginalized. The political tensions identified by Wolcott (1994) are another reason why a CRT approach to interpretation is necessary. Critical race researchers begin with the centering of race, the use of narratives, and other tools to capture voice. Interpretation and description are standard tools for making sense of data for scholars who use this approach. I further discuss CRT as a frame for my study, next.

CRT

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I described the potential of narratives as a literary method of CRT. In chapter 2 of this dissertation, I presented the origins of CRT, its application to educational scholarship, and the connection between CRT and narrative inquiry. In this section of chapter 3, I discuss CRT as a frame for my dissertation. First, I define CRT, present its common tenets, and articulate its two most prominent values: race and voice. Race and voice were two CRT values that were particularly useful for exploring the marginalized educational contexts identified in this dissertation. I then discuss narrative research, also called narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry served as a complementary method of the CRT theoretical frame for this dissertation. Where CRT served as a theoretical frame to identify and discuss race and voice in this dissertation, narrative inquiry moved CRT from theory to method and provided a tool for both description and interpretation of the data, in line with Wolcott's (1994) qualitative research approaches. In this section I ask and explain, what is narrative inquiry? How has narrative inquiry been used? How does narrative inquiry complement CRT? What factors connect CRT and narrative inquiry? How can narrative inquiry be used as a CRT method? I begin with a definition of CRT.

CRT Defined

CRT originated in response to race-neutral legal scholarship. Developed by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (as cited in Lynn, 2004), critical legal scholarship centered race and racism at the heart of its investigation and analysis. Lynn (2004) summarized tenets associated with the original legal CRT. The tenets summarized legal scholars belief that

> the legal system in the U.S. is inherently unfair with regard to people of color and that it must be incessantly and systematically critiqued for its failure to address racism in the law . . . the centrality of race and intransigence of racism in contemporary American

> society. . . . Critical race theorists reject West-European/Modernist claims of neutrality, objectivity, rationality, and universality. . . . . [CRT] historicizes its critiques of the law by relying heavily upon experiential, situated and "subjugated" knowledge of people of color. . . . Finally, CRT is interdisciplinary. (Lynn, 2004, p. 156)

In the mid-1990s, the CRT framework was introduced to education through the work of Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 1998) and Ladson-Billings & Tate (2006). Since then, the CRT framework has been used in a number of disciplines to identify the presence, impact, and condition of racism in American culture. The application of CRT in education recognizes the ability of educational institutions to advance privileged populations while oppressing the marginalized through school curriculum, school design, and school interactions. These interactions are influenced by race and can include teacher–student, school personnel–student, and school–community exchanges (Ballentine & Spade, 2004). Like their legal forerunners, CRT scholars in education are guided by central tenets, identified next.

CRT's Central Tenets

Four tenets guide CRT and have been consistently identified in CRT literature. Lynn and Parker (2006) summarize the tenets to include:

> 1) recognition of the centrality of race and racism to American life, 2) the importance of confronting the historical presence and influence of racism through a historical and contextual analysis, 3) the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized should be known and recognized [as legitimate data], and 4) that narratives or storytelling is to be recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge [and method] (Crenshaw, et al 1995; Ladson- Billings, 1995b, 1998,1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1996; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Solorzano &Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2002, 2005). (See Lynn and Parker, 2006, pages 260-261 for their listing of CRT tenets)

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) and Lynn (2004) also identified similar tenets in their frames for moving CRT from theory to method and to inform pedagogy. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) described critical race methodology in terms of

> the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination . . . the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice . . . a liberatory or transformative response . . . the centrality of experiential knowledge . . . the transdisciplinary perspective [that] challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on race and racism by placing them both historical and contemporary contexts. (pp. 26–27)

CRT in education, like its legal forerunner and peer theories (Critical race methodology and critical race pedagogy) first and foremost acknowledges and centers race and voice and

particular values for understand the complex issues facing U.S. schools. I describe these values in more detail in the following section.

Race and Voice as Prominent Values

CRT provides a frame with race at the forefront. CRT exposes racism in the lived experiences of the marginalized and oppressed by centering and valuing minority experiential knowledge. The application of this theory to my dissertation has two overarching connections. The first is premised on the participants of my study: the students. This dissertation is centered on African American student interpretations and perspectives, which speaks directly to the CRT framework about using racially subjugated or experiential knowledge to understand the context by which race and voice are engaged. As members of a traditionally marginalized race who continue to experience disproportionate gaps in achievement and schooling outcomes compared to White students, the experiences of this particular set of students are important. The use of the CRT lens facilitates an investigation and interpretation about how race influences the students' school settings.

The second premise supporting the application of the CRT lens to my study is that the CRT values voice and storytelling as legitimate knowledge that provides valid data for critically inquiries in qualitative research. As such, collecting the narratives of each student provided the opportunity to understand the experiences, interpretations, and perspectives of these African American students' aspirations for accessing college.

In line with the CRT framework (both theoretical and methodological), I asked the students questions eliciting their perspectives on aspirations for college, the help that they were or were not receiving (vis á vi capacity-building systems such as support from people or the presence of intervening programs), and the relationship of aspirations and capacity-building systems to the students' social and academic development. The findings of this dissertation (discussed in chapter 5) reflected interpretations that I derived from the participant narratives and the descriptive process used to report the data findings in chapter 4. Next, I reconnect to the discussion on narratives as a process of inquiry and as a CRT method.

Narrative Inquiry as a CRT Method

A CRT framework uses a theoretical lens to point out problems originated in racism. CRT uses counternarratives as one approach of the critical race methodology. CRT scholars such as Bell (1987, 1992, 2004) have used stories to uncover and analyze the master or majoritarian

stories of privileged society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) described three types of counternarratives related to liberation from racism: (a) *Personal narratives* are individuals' personal accounts, (b) *other people's narratives* describe an experience in the third person, and (b) *composite narrative* "draws on various forms of data to recount the racialized, sexualized, and classed experience of people of color" (p. 33). The researcher becomes the author of a story that depicts the social, political, and historical contexts described from real-life experiences through composite narrative. I introduced this dissertation (see chapter1) using composite narratives, but I used personal narratives obtained from personal accounts to acquire and present data. I discuss how narrative inquiry has been defined and its uses next.

Andrews et al. (2008) stated, "The definition of 'narrative' itself is in dispute" (p. 1). Moen (2006), however, cited Gudmundsdottir in defining narrative research as "the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of the experience" (p. 2). The ability to "see" and understand events in different ways or as "layers of meaning . . . [to] bring them into useful dialogue with each other . . . [and] to understand more about individual and social change" are important aspects of narrative researcher (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 1).

Narratives focus on how stories are structured by the person providing the account, but the focus is also about how those accounts are structured by the researcher (Andrews et al., 2008). Madison (2005) viewed critical approaches to narratives as processes of performance. These performances involve reciprocity between researcher and participant and how the meaning and structure of narratives are described and interpreted, as in Wolcott's (1994) description and interpretation. In connection with CRT, narrative inquiry asks whose perspective is being presented, about what or whom, and in what ways? How does the researcher position impact the story as described and interpreted? A fifth aspect that I identified in the reciprocal process of narrative inquiry is that of the reader or the research being presented. In what ways might the reader's own position influence his or her understanding of the narrative, its description, and interpretation? If Madison viewed critical research, its description, and interpretation as performance, then one must account for the reader as "audience." I explain the connection between narrative description and interpretation of data as public sense-making, in chapter 5.

The uses of narratives or storytelling are functions of society. Storytelling, categorization, and even stereotyping have been used to explain and cast people and events. The storytelling

tradition that serves to marginalize people and events is identified by critical race scholars as "*majoritarian*" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002 p. 32), "*master narratives* or *monovocal* stories" (Montecinos, 1995, pp. 293–294). These narratives are premised in the condition of Whiteness as an often (though not always) invisible privilege (McIntosh, 1989). Tatum (1997) noted, "Every societal indicator, from salary to life expectancy, reveals the advantages of being white" (p. 8). Montecinos explained the perils of master narratives:

> The use of a master narrative to represent a group is bound to provide a very narrow depiction of what it means to be Mexican-American, African American, White, and so on. . . . A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a group's cultural life. . . . A monovocal account will not only engender stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representations in which fellow members of a group represented cannot recognize themselves. (pp. 293–294)

Narrative inquiry can be used as a complement to CRT to counter master or majoritarian narratives. Storytelling has a long history in the African American oral tradition and has been used by CRT scholars like Bell and Ladson-Billings (see earlier section). Because of the tangible aspects of narrative inquiry to collect data (e.g., conducting interviews or engaging in journal writing), I was able to use narratives as a CRT method. Where CRT served as a theoretical frame to identify race and voice in this dissertation, narrative inquiry moved CRT from theoretical frame to method by providing a tool for both description and interpretation of the data. Like CRT, narratives served as a literary method that presented voice and developed context, in line with CRT tenets. In the following, I present the design of the dissertation.

Research Design

Selection of Site

Purposive sampling was used to select the first group of participants. Purposive selection is used in qualitative research to obtain information-rich cases for in-depth study. Purposive sampling in qualitative case studies is useful because the sample size is often too small for random sampling. The objective of purposive sampling is to provide information-rich cases, of which a great deal of the central issues under exploration can be learned (Patton, 2002).

Important to the exploration of issues related to my dissertation (garnering student perspectives on the relationship between college aspirations, capacity-building systems, and the academic and social development of African American youth) was the selection of a site where information-rich participants could be found. I chose to conduct the interviews at a CAP site

affiliated with a state flagship institution of higher education. The CAP was selected because of its specific objective: to prepare minority and low-income students for access to college. Familiarity with the program, the uniqueness of its purpose (there are no other Texas-based, university-sponsored, college access outreach centers that intentionally omit institutional recruiting), and the availability of students in the program who also attend the same high school were fundamental to the study. Additional reasons for selecting the site included the annual success of the program. At the time of site selection for this study, the CAP reported up to a 30% advantage in high school graduation and college access rates over the state average.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were high school students, though supplementary data included secondary interviews with the students' counselors at each of the high schools and the university-sponsored CAP. Interviews were established with the two student groups. The student groups were homogenous in that they were African American youth in their junior or senior year (including rising juniors and seniors) or who were at least 16 years old. Student Group 1 consisted of African American students who were in the university-sponsored CAP. The second student group consisted of peers in relation to members in Group 1, who attended the same high school but were not part of the CAP. Background interviews were conducted with the CAP and high school counselors. These interviews were not included in the chapter on the findings or analysis but were used to help triangulate the accounts of the student narratives.

Data Collection Strategy

Prior to collecting my data, I worked with the university-sponsored outreach program of this study during the summer of 2007. I served as the speech instructor and co-facilitator of the First Start summer component of the outreach program. First Start was designed to introduce and prepare eighth graders transitioning into the ninth grade to the high school curriculum. Program participants took courses and engaged in supplemental lessons including math, science, speech, and personal development. The university-sponsored outreach program has affiliated centers throughout the state, including its main site located in close proximity to the sponsoring university. I worked specifically with the main campus site's students throughout the summer program's general session, which occurred over the course of 4 weeks within a 2-month period. I also assisted with the coordination of the culminating event, the Academic Relay. Participants for all five affiliated sites were invited to attend the sponsoring university's campus for a 2-day

academic competition involving students from each of the outreach sites. Student participants remained overnight for First Start, which permitted them to experience life on the campus during the visit. Participants stayed in on-campus housing and ate in the residence hall dining facility. They competed in teams testing their knowledge of the subjects taught in the First Start summer program for awards given to the students at a closing ceremony.

I worked with the summer students during the months of June and July, although I spent April and May of 2007 developing a rapport with First Start staff and high-school-aged participants who attended the program throughout the academic school year for tutoring. I also continued to engage in informational and observation site visits throughout the 2007–2008 academic year to continue building rapport with staff and increase my knowledge of the program. My dissertation committee approved my research and I was advanced to candidacy.

After submitting an application to the institutional review board for approval of my research, obtaining site approval and parental consent, I set up and conducted interviews. The student interviews served as the primary interviews intended to provide direct data for this study. I also conducted secondary interviews with counselors affiliated with the students of this study as a method for triangulation of the acquired data. I describe the data collection strategy next.

I interviewed 7 student participants, 2 males and 5 females, all of whom are African American and attended the same high school in a central Texas city. Four students were attending Bush High School (a pseudonym), 2 were enrolled in the Elite Magnet Program, and 1 self-reported official membership in both schools. The students were 16 years of age and older, with 1 in Grade 10 and 6 in Grade 12. All of the participants were college aspiring. Five of the students were participants in the university-sponsored CAP highlighted in this study. Two had formal or informal access to other support systems for college. I purposively sampled the first group of students (Group 1), and utilized chain sampling or snowball techniques to solicit the remaining participants (Group 2).

I transcribed the interviews personally. The process proved beneficial. It allowed me to relive the experience of the participants' conversations with me, allowing for stronger recollection of the student narratives. I conducted a two-prong strategy within the transcription process. First, I listened to the transcriptions and noted emerging themes that surfaced. Next, I began the actual transcription, confirming, adding to, or changing my themes as I listened to and typed the words verbatim from the audio recordings. Using an inductive strategy, I engaged a

coding process based on the emergent themes and categorized the themes according to their general to specific application and according to their relationship to other themes within the transcriptions. Using a constant-comparative technique, I compared student responses question by question. In some cases, the key words in my questions became themes. I initially drew what appeared to be 12 themes. The questions, which were part of my interview guide, were developed out of a review of the existing literature on youth, schools, and their supports for college, and from three central tenets on which I based my work. These tenets were also developed from the literature and from my experience with the specific school site and university-sponsored CAP of this study.

During the coding process, I continued to look for consistencies among the participant answers as well as any related outliers. This process allowed me to collapse my coding system from 12 to 5 overarching themes. I developed a two-step member-check system. First, I employed member checks among the interview participants for accuracy of the information that I transcribed. Then, I conducted member checking among willing participants that involved a review of my interpretation of the findings. Triangulation, the synthesis and checking of data from multiple sources (see section on triangulation), was used to proof the acquired qualitative interview data, the narratives. I achieved triangulation through the secondary interviews conducted with the counselors of the students on this study. Their insight collaborated student perspectives both directly and indirectly by offering insight on the school environment and culture, support strategies that they encourage among students, and their capacity as affiliates with the school or with the university-sponsored CAP. As a former administrator, my direct experience with the student participants' high school provided me with an additional support in terms of understanding the site-specific schooling process and structure that the study participants described during their interviews. This "inside knowledge" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 282) served as an additional tool for data accuracy regarding the school structure and terms described by study participants and counselors. I discuss my own position as an African American (Hill Collins, 2006) researcher, and former administrator at the school site in more detail in chapter 5 of this dissertation. I discuss special design considerations as related to the interview process next.

Special Interviewing Considerations: Youth Participants

My primary research population consisted of 7 high school students of African American backgrounds. The nature of this study posed some unique challenges dealing with issues surrounding power, capacity, and aspirations. An important consideration relating to power was the potential for existing differentials between youth and between youth and adults. For example, it was important to create an interviewing dynamic where students selected into the study because of their aspirations and capacity for achievement did not create a division between participation and lack of participation in the CAP (M. Young, personal communication, February 5, 2007). As an interviewer, I had to use caution to avoid creating a sense of caste-like stratification among the participants. This was particularly important as I addressed some participants who appeared to be struggling with school adult relationships. The use of peer-based chain sampling or snowballing (Patton, 2002) assisted me in addressing this concern along with the design of questions that contributed to peer appointment of the interviewees for students in Group 2.

Youth–adult interaction was another area of consideration. As the sole researcher, developing a sense of rapport while maintaining professionalism involved an organized protocol that permitted flexibility in the questioning of and allotted time provided for youth interviews. Best (2007) cited Weber, Miracle, and Skehan's work and recommended the same considerations as with adult interviewees, but youth responding to questions among adult–youth power differentials might have increased the likelihood of inaccurate responses.

Logistical considerations were another area of concern when interviewing youth. My participants were interviewed at their respective CAP site or at a local community site like their neighborhood library. In the former case, the students got permission from and were accompanied by a parent if they were under 18. The interviews took place in the afternoon or on weekends to avoid interrupting the students' schedules.

Three other areas of consideration were taken into account. These related to issues in dealing with participants, specific to the nature of working with youth and as factors of qualitative research in general. I present them next.

Special Interviewing Considerations: Qualitative Design Issues

Trustworthiness. I used four strategies to address trustworthiness in this study. First, I engaged in the process of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). As

described earlier, each student participant was provided a transcript of his or her interview and the resulting chapters for feedback and an opportunity to provide clarity of meaning. Second, I triangulated my research for reliability and validation or credibility by conducting informal observations and secondary interviews with counselors for relational feedback (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Third, I engaged in peer debriefing, or "exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might other wise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 308). Fourth, I provided descriptions of the steps that I have undergone for the replication or continuation of a future study related to this research.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity refers to the idea that researchers give something back to the participant, which can be offered in a variety of forms. Since college access is a central theme of this investigation, participants were provided with information about accessing college, particularly for those in the study who were not on the path to postsecondary education.

Limitations. One limitation of this study was the time spent at the Texas school site. I benefited from previous involvement at the location but had to consider the limited observations with the students and context of the phenomena under exploration. According to Legard et al. (2003), the narrative approach "involve[s] intensive and extended data collection with several interviews with each participant, and participants are given fairly free rein to shape their own narratives" (p. 141). A second limitation of this study was that it did not present interview data on those segments of the population considered disengaged or dropouts, due to constraints in funding and timing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a brief recap of chapters 1 and 2 pertaining to the focus and research questions for this dissertation. I described the nature of qualitative research as a process of inquiry and methods for organizing the data. I discussed CRT as a theoretical frame for this dissertation and narrative inquiry as a CRT method for describing and interpreting the data. Finally, I described the design used to complete this dissertation. The tradition of CRT framework requires that the voice of the marginalized be brought to the forefront. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), marginalized racial groups, such as African Americans, are "injured by racism" (p. 27). African American students are doubly injured by their present condition in schools and, as the offspring of their African American parents, they are injured by

the historical legacy of racism against their culture. The disparity in college access (particularly 4-year colleges) among African Americans remains apparent and was demonstrated in the literature provided in chapter 2 of this dissertation. I sought to provide readers with the experiences and voices of 7 African American, college-aspiring students. Through the use of narratives or story telling, CRT "names racist injuries and identifies their origins" (Solorzano &Yosso, 2002, p.27). It permits marginalized voices to be centered.

Similarly, the narratives of the students included in this dissertation served as the CRT injury-naming function that exposed racial inequalities pertaining to the participants' school environment. The narrative description and the interpretive findings were intended to be used by other youth, policymakers, and youth-oriented practitioners facing related circumstances. The inclusion of the voices of African American students who were successful in attempting to access college might provide useful insight on how youth-oriented environments can be nurturing, capacity-building spaces for the betterment of African American education

Critical race scholars in particular commonly use qualitative inquiry and narratives. In the book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well,* Bell (1992) created interactions with several characters to articulate and provide insight on the experiences of African Americans. He begins by creating the setting for interaction with a character, followed by a conversation that provides perspectives on the phenomena under discussion. In one scene his character is traveling in a cab, in route to a lecture. Bell (1992) introduced another character, the cab driver, who is named after a literary figure in the writings of renowned author Langston Hughes. Bell used the play on names to introduce readers to an important element of African American culture as well as to introduce the cab driver who would provide his perspective on African American experiences. Bell's use of the taxi cab conversation is similar to the narrative interview method in qualitative inquiry, which is designed to gather data through dialogue in its natural setting.

The composite counternarratives in chapter 1 of this dissertation served as examples of the utility of narrative data. Like Bell's (1992) characters, these composite narratives helped to set the stage for the types of issues and sense-making identified and interpreted by the participants. The real-life narratives of the participants presented in the narrative descriptive findings (chapter 4) of this dissertation set the stage for interpretation and sense-making of the issues the research participants faced.

Another aspect of CRT's use of the counternarrative that is complemented by qualitative inquiry is the concept of the influence and relationship between the researcher and the researched. Strauss and Corbin (1990) referred to this as theoretical sensitivity:

> A personal quality of the researcher, it indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. One can come to the research situation with varying degrees of sensitivity depending upon previous reading and experience with or relevant to the data. It can also be developed further during the research process. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning in data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that, which isn't. (pp. 41–42)

Similarly, using the counternarrative as a liberating inquiry of the critical race method, Bell (1992) demonstrated the interplay of his knowledge and values in relation to the African American experience through his conversation with the cab driver. What Strauss and Corbin (1990) referred to as theoretical sense-making, I describe as a process of public sense-making in chapter 4 of this dissertation. Public sense-making explores the interaction between the researcher, the research participants, and the research subject's manner of interpretation. It acknowledges the multiple ways that the information can be interpreted based on the experiences and knowledge brought to the study. Because of its cohesion with the naturalistic process of inquiry, narratives, and by extension the critical race frame, counternarratives are a complementary method of data collection and analysis in qualitative research.

Of the last two chapters of this dissertation, chapter 4 presents a narrative description of the data, obtained through interviews with the 7 African American students involved in this study. Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of the findings from the narrative descriptions from chapter 4.

Chapter 4

A Narrative Description of the Findings: The Implications of Public Sense-Making, Transparency, and Participant Voice

Public Sense-Making

In terms of sense-making, Larson and Ovando (2001) suggested that inquiry-driven processes contribute to the creation of more equitable school systems by undoing the traditional logics and patterns that have maintained school inequities. They articulated a move away from "reflective practice as a private, cognitive process . . . as something educators must do alone" (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 166).

I extend their idea to develop a concept of *public sense-making*. This conceptual and strategic technique can and should be applied to empirical research and social science practices, specifically regarding the methods employed for collecting and describing research findings. Public sense-making among qualitative research requires that data findings are reported as a narrative description or narrative findings. This approach involves a reporting of the findings where participant narratives are included as thick, deep, and often extended block-quote descriptions in order to center participant voice in the findings.

Public sense-making involves the interaction of narrative inquiry and sense-making, which occurs on three planes: (a) the interaction between the researcher and the research participant, (b) the interaction between the research participants and the phenomena that they describe, and (c) the interaction between the narrative and the reader of the narrative. This concept can be illustrated by thinking of a theatrical play and the relationship between the play script (the story or phenomenon that the research inquires about), the performance, and the audience. The play script represents the researcher and phenomena or line of inquiry that the research seeks to pursue. The performance represents the research participants and the narrative that they provide, and the audience represents the readers of the research. In the same manner in which an actor performs a character's role, the research participant's performance involves relaying his or her experiences in terms of how that participant perceived the phenomena under study.

Similar to the audience of a theatrical performance, readers of narrative descriptive findings engages in a type of agreement. The reader, perhaps inexplicitly, agrees to trust or at least follow the researcher's choice of topic and choice of participants the researcher believes

might best illuminate the phenomenon under exploration. Even at the point of the study's conclusion, the reader complies by continuing to read the conclusions presented by the researcher. Yet, throughout the process there are multiple ways to interpret this interaction under the concept of public sense-making. The first two have already been described. The first is the interaction between the researcher and research participant. The second is the interaction between the research participants and the phenomena that they describe. The third involves the interaction between the narrative and the reader of the narrative.

This third interaction serves as the crux of the relationship between the use of narrative descriptions to report findings and the sense-making that occurs as a result of that interaction. Under this third interaction, the reader as the audience can draw his or her own conclusion about the relativity of the narrative and of the researcher's sense-making, based on his or her own experience, perspective, and position. Referring back to the example of the theatrical performance, the audience may take the script as it is presented, or they may interpret the story differently from that of the intentions of the script or the performers. Similarly, narrative descriptions using large block quotes permit the reader to perceive the perspective of the research participant and the researcher and to incorporate the reader's own understanding of the phenomena. At the heart of this descriptive process is the researcher's responsibility to present the narrative so that the voice of the research participant is clear. Interpretations and sense-making follow the presentation of the narrative description. The reader then may accept, reject, change, or extend the implications, building upon the public aspect of the sense-making process.

Transparency

Empirical research involving human subjects usually requires that the researcher explain the purpose, scope, and interest of the study to the participant. The issue becomes one of communication, trust, and ethics between the researcher and the research participant about the phenomena under study. The researcher begins with an angle, an objective. The study is encased by the subjective inquiry (however minimal) or interest of the researcher. There is no objective "ground zero" from which the study begins. Rather, the researcher shares the purpose of the study and by the nature of asking participants for their perspective, uses their experiences to bring the phenomenon to light within the frame of its specific participants (Moen, 2006).

Even with trustworthiness strategies in place, there comes a point when the researcher has to trust the participant narrative as it is presented. Transparency of the findings assists with both

situating the researcher's position and research participant's voice through narrative, as they relate to the phenomena under study. Transparency also helps develop trustworthiness in terms of drawing conclusions about general research findings and this study in particular. Although the ability to generalize findings from qualitative research has been debated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the very nature of qualitative research as a study of the natural setting assumes interrelatedness of humans as social beings. It is the interrelationships among humans that make generalizations possible within qualitative research.

Transparency is a vital component of the data reporting technique that I conceptualize as public sense-making. The use of extended block quotations is necessary to assure centrality of voice and transparency of the research findings. Public sense-making of research findings supports the CRT tenet regarding the centrality of voice. Because of its transparent process, the public sense-making technique extends critical race from theory to method. Next, I present narrative findings beginning with an introduction.

Introduction to the Findings

The findings presented demonstrate that issues of identity, communication, expectations, and support have significant meanings for the youth of this study. Using a narrative descriptive format, I begin by describing the students who participated in this project and their perspectives on the development of their aspirations for college, their familial expectations, and program intervention in terms of developing their capacity for accessing college. The first section shares findings corresponding to Research Question 1: In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity building systems (supports and interventions) for college? The second section describes these students' experiences with school and peer relationships and its impact, on their academic and social development, corresponding to Research Question 2: How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college? Finally, I provide concluding remarks about the findings. A discussion and implications of the findings in relation to the literature are presented in chapter 5.

Section 1: Student Perspectives on Their Aspirations and Support

The 7 high school aged students of this study are African American or members of the African diaspora, meaning that their roots are representative of the indigenous histories of the African American culture (i.e., southern or U.S.-born American), the comparatively more recent immigrant populations from the Caribbean (e.g., Jamaican, West Indian, Haitian, etc.), or from

the motherland continent of Africa from which all of these and other unmentioned ethnicities can trace their lineage. In the tradition of the culture's community (broadly speaking), the participants collectively identified themselves as *Black* or *African American* and used such descriptions interchangeably. Two students discussed their African heritage while describing their family construct and expectations; however, they also used the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably. It was important to note that these students' identity construct was described in part based on their family lineage, regardless of whether they were born in the United States. Collectively, they identified themselves as Black or African American, but deeper conversations about themselves, their perspectives, and their influences revealed language that connected to their parents or elders' home countries and the belief values developed therein.

The students' descriptions of their home, school, and in some cases work life demonstrated that they belonged to varying levels of the middle-class sector. Some students offered experiences and insight that indicated a moderate middle-class status, others indicated a working-class status, and still others indicated factors that blurred the line between the middle and working classes. Despite their differing social-class status, the students' narratives described middle-class values in terms of their access to resources and expectations on behalf of their familial and supplemental supports. When they did describe differences in resource acquisition, it was often within a frame of racialized experiences that related to their school's practices and opportunities. Familial educational background of these student participants ranged from no college experience, to some, to completed college experience at the undergraduate level. Two participants had immediate family members (a parent or grandparent) who were faculty members at institutions of higher education. Six participants had someone that they considered an immediate family member who completed at least undergraduate college. One participant had a family member who had some college experience but did not persist toward completion. The following is a narrative description of each of the student participants of this study and their perspectives on their aspirations and support for college access.

Faith's Perspectives on Aspirations and Support

Faith is currently a senior at Bush High School. She came to me as one of the purposively sampled students in Group 1, at the invitation of her university-sponsored college-access counselor. She was a fast speaker, vivacious and outgoing, probably one of the main reasons that the outreach counselor insisted on having me meet with her first. She looked to be about 5'7",

but her attitude, confidence, and fun-loving manner made her appear taller. Like many African American females, Faith was mature in her physical development. Coupled with her "love of life" and somewhat sassy style, she might have been mistaken for being just a little older. There was something refreshing about her open manner and tenacious spirit that alerted you to her pre-adult status. Faith presented herself as willing to take life head on. Our first visit together was at the university-sponsored college-access center located on the east side of the city.

The program had just completed its move from its former location near the neighboring university that sponsored it. From a comparative account, the move was not an enticing one. Besides being further from the university and its resources, the current location was situated on a service road that ran along a major highway. The building's facade was old and worn with no clear marker as to the entrance point, which was surrounded by the parked cars of those working inside the building. If other visitors like myself managed to find the entrance, accessing the building was the next obstacle. The doors were kept locked so visitors had to be buzzed in by someone on the inside. Once inside, there was no obvious access to the office suites, barring the elevator. The former office was also located on the east side of the city. The location, historically and intentionally designated by segregationist city policies, once served as the main locale for the African American community and more recent Hispanic immigrants and migrants who came to the Texas city of this study. As a resident of the community, I witnessed first hand as gentrification continued to take a toll on the historic residents of the east side. Neighbors shared with me that homes, which had been in their families for generations, were sold and refurbished for higher paying customers who did not necessarily reflect the traditional community membership or its values.

The college-access center of this study was located in what had rapidly become viewed as potentially prime real estate for agents who benefited from gentrification. Rather than continue to support the center's location and provide its participants and staff with access to the various forms of capital transmission (e.g., funding, networking, etc.) that the neighborhood might undergo, the center's operation was moved. The former building sat at the intersection of a major road with access to public transportation, was located next to community-based restaurants where operating staff could frequent, and was within blocks of other major streets undergoing revitalization (or gentrification) in the area. The downtown corridor was within minutes of the former center. Physically, the building, constructed from glass and stone, was modern compared

to the new site. While the option of buzzing visitors in existed at this site as well, a visitor could see the receptionist through the glass doors prior to entry, making it more accessible. Inside, the tri-level space had dedicated areas towards the back of the building where student tutoring and activities occurred.

As I anticipated Faith's arrival, I wondered what she and her peers thought of the new space. I imagined Faith and her peers doing as I had upon my first visit, walking halfway around the base of the building in an attempt to locate the main door and then being inundated with complicated directions to be buzzed in and a lack of signage. I could not help but reflect on the irony of a college-access program having so many obstacles to its physical building entrance. The staff, on the other hand, were wonderful. They were interested and supportive of their students and of my project ambition: to provide a space where student voice might illuminate research on college-access issues and strategies.

The CAP's assistant director designated an office where my interviews would be conducted in private. I waited in the office when I heard Faith chatting with one of the CAP staff. She was laughing at her apparent near miss in pressing the button to a wrong suite. She laughed. It was a boisterous laugh, yet gentle in tone. She beamed a smile at me as she walked in: "Hi, Ms. Hayes!"

Her hair was braided in a series of long flat twists that ran along her neck, just brushing her collarbone. Clear beads adorned her hair from the crown of her neck to where her braids ended; each strand clicked against each other as she turned her head. She wore a red-and-white striped cotton shirt with a scoop neck and matching red pants. She had her shades with her. I welcomed her and joined in her laughter at the "access maze." When I asked her what she thought of the new space, she shrugged and smiled, stating that it was "ok, but they just moved and all," referring to the center and staff. She was perceptive enough to pick up on my inquiry, and her response exhibited a willingness to be flexible and understanding. We chatted rather informally for the first 20 minutes of our time together. I shared that I had worked at her high school prior to working on my degree. Together, we named various staff and students, discussed changes in Bush High School since my departure, and life at the university. It was not long before Faith was sharing some of her experiences and her general aspirations with me. Our introductory rapport developed quickly. Similarities between ourselves helped in developing our rapport and included our identity as African American females, our connection to Bush High

School, and our similar sense of community. It was easy to laugh together at our experience getting into the building. Faith asked about my experiences growing up in New York City. Some of the school-related situations that I shared were familiar to her.

We soon got into the formal focus of our meeting. I began by introducing myself to her formally, sharing my involvement with the college-access center over the last year, and offering more about the nature of the study that I was conducting. When I referred to the study as my dissertation, she inquired as to what that meant. As soon as I began to discuss the project as the culminating segment of my Ph.D. studies, Faith's eyes lit up. She shared that it was her goal to obtain her Ph.D. The discussion continued as Faith described her aspirations for college and the support and expectations surrounding her aspirations. After a conversation about the formal definition of aspirations, self-direction, and intrinsic purpose, Faith provided her own take on aspirations:

> I don't think you can take away a person's aspirations unless they allow it. It's all about (pause for reflection). I guess you could say—You can't take away someone's aspirations unless they allow you to because it's all about that person, and I don't want to call it weak. 'Cause if you allow someone to take away your aspirations, then that's like, I mean it's just the weakest thing ever. I really don't want to call it weak. I'm looking for the word for it. It's like you can't—goals are not meant to be taken away. They are meant to be set in stone and stay there. So if you are allowing someone to take them away from you [reflective pause] then you, then obviously those weren't the goals to be reached. So you have to be an [aspiring] person. You have to be the one to say, "This is what it's going to be" and not change.

Regarding whether school helped or hurt, increased or decreased aspirations for college, Faith responded,

> I think it all depends on the person, on the student. If you get to school and all you do is study a little bit and then you party (sucks her teeth in disapproval), then your grade goes down, that allows school to take away from you.

Faith described a dual sense of responsibility and a relationship between an individual's aspirations, their efforts in executing coursework, and school:

> If you got and lost a scholarship and can no longer stay in school, that's what it is. You have to be determined to go to and stay in school, stay focused; be all you can be and not let anything get in your way. You can say that all you want, but there are going to be obstacles.

Faith reported personal responsibility as important in building aspirations and cultivating school success. She appeared to recognize the realities that students faced in terms of obstacles to

their aspirations, but did not excuse it: "You cannot let those obstacles slow you down, you have to be able to go over it, stay on track. 'Cause I am going to stay in track." Challenges to Faith's aspirations were obstacles she believed could be overcome.

As she continued her narrative, Faith shared when she began to aspire towards college and why it was important to her. As she discussed her personal aspirations for college, Faith revealed another reason for accessing college: "I want to be able to provide for everybody." She offered that while she was not the sole reason, her college success served as a common source of pride and concern for her family.

> I always knew I wanted to go to college. And for one, I wanted to make my family proud. That's one [reason]. No, no, no—that's two. For one, I want to be the one out of our family who goes on to be like, *successful*. You know, like history. Like my family is U.S. history and I am being written down in the book. My family is being written down in the book. I want to be the one that's like, "She went on to this and this. She went on to [names a local university]. She went and got her [degree] in pharmacy."

Faith described a dual approach to her college aspirations that coupled her personal aspirations with her desire to help her family. She also described an approach of seeking to train for a career in a subject that she enjoyed. Personal exposure to the demands and realities of her initial career choice, law, allowed Faith to think through her career and college path. As an example, she described her experience as a participant in the National Youth Leadership Forum of Law. She was provided an opportunity to attend through a friend in her church who sponsored her attendance. Each student participant was assigned a role in the mock investigation and trial process, through which Faith learned that her childhood aspirations to pursue a career as a lawyer no longer matched her interest:

> I wanted to be a lawyer since I was like 11 years old and this gave me a chance to gain hands-on experience on what a lawyer does and how much work it involved. I love to work, don't get me wrong, man, I'm a hard-working girl! But it just took away from some of the fun things that we could have been doing. We had a set time to finish the simulation and it put pressure on us 'cause we was like, "Man, we gotta do this, we gotta do that," you know, before this amount of time. I think we had about 3 hours for each. That was not enough time.

Faith described the various characters that each participant was assigned to play, offering that while she got to play a role that she was interested in (forensic specialist), the amount of work and time constraints associated with the tasks were not appealing to her. She articulated

that the reality of the challenges of the position did not match the commercialized image that she derived from television.

> We had a lot of fun doing it. It was fun, but it was too much. You know it's going to be boring, and it was boring to me. But on TV it looks like the most wonderful job ever. But it was boring to me, and I don't want to pursue something in my life that I am not going to like.

Faith's initial response to no longer pursue a career as a lawyer led her to focus on her other lifelong interest, dancing. She described how she approached the situation with her mother and her mother's reaction of support, which included redirection without completely denying her daughter's interest.

> I was like, "Mom, lawyering is out. I am not even trying to be a lawyer anymore. I love to dance, dance is my thing. I'm a dancer that's just it." She was like, "You don't make a lot of money off of dancing, you gotta have something, you know, a foundation where most of your money is going to come from. Dancing will be your side gig." And I was like, "Ok."

Left with dancing as a "side gig," Faith described how she used her personal experience with her family's medical situation and her money handling skills to uncover her new career path, pharmacy.

> My college advisor out of school called a few of the students out of class. And these [medical center personnel] were there. Some were pharmacist, an RN, and some technical person. They came and gave us these different packets on what each job was about. So I . . . picked up the paper on pharmacy; it had the category, the description of the category of the job, how much you get paid (giggles), you know, how you get there and stuff. That actually seemed like a plan, and pharmacists come out of school making like $135,000. And I was like, "Coming straight out of school making that kind of money? Ok, hmm." And you know I have to take medicine for the rest of my life because of thyroid problems so I was like, "You know, I am always reminding my mom about her medicine or playing with someone's medicine," and so I think it would have fun being a pharmacist. And so I went home that day and said "Mom, I want to deal drugs legally," and she said "WHAT?" and I said, "I wanna deal drugs legally," and she said, "You want to be a pharmacist?" And I was like, "Yes, Mom, duh," and then she was like, "What made you change your mind to that?" And I was like, "I don't know, I had this meeting today with my college advisor and she brought in these people and they [referring to the pharmacists] make a lot of good money and stuff. I could go get my doctorate and probably have my own little pharmacy and own Walgreens, you know?" And she was like, "If that's what you want to do then I am behind you 100%," and I was like, "Ok," and she was like—because, wait—before that we had talked, before the pharmacy stuff, we had talked about me being an accountant because I love numbers, numbers are cool.

I love money—I mean I don't love money, I take that back! Money is just—I can count it, I am good at my job now, I am a cashier, and work on the register. I never come up short. So she [her mom] was like, "What about an accountant?" [offering parental guidance]. I was like (sighing), that's good, maybe later. I can actually be what I want to after I become a pharmacist. I could be a lawyer after if that's what I decide I want to do. She [her mom] was like, "Ok, what ever you want to do. As long as you go to college and you know get out of my house and find something to do [gentle chiding]. . . . Make a lot of money so you can take care of me and your family." And I was like, "That's cool. That's fine." So, now I want to be a pharmacist.

Faith's description of her career strategy included communication with and guidance from her mother. She described her familial relationships in ways that indicated care, support, trust, and humor. In response to my inquiry about other forms of support, Faith discussed her involvement in the university-sponsored college-access program where we were interviewing as well as other support programs. These included her induction as a Delta Gem, part of a national Black sorority's outreach to high-school-aged young ladies. Faith had been on several college visits and explored college-based transition programs.

Faith: I'm a Delta Gem and we go on college visits, and college visits with my church, the college ministry. Matter of fact we go for spring break, we went to all of the colleges in Atlanta and it was so much fun! Man, and shopped till I dropped.

Me: I know you *did* have a good time (laughing).

Faith: (laughing) And last year we went to Louisiana, New Orleans, and Rust, and Baton Rouge, and other places. And plus I have gone with the school, too. I have been on so many college visits that I don't keep up anymore. Well, I write them down in my journal but I can't remember off the top of my head. I have been to maybe—35 campuses.

Me: Do any of them stand out where you think you might want to apply?

Faith: Texas Tech did stand out to me a lot. Because they have this Pegasus program for first-generation college students and I thought that was a really good plan. They pay for most of your things for, I think, your first 2 years. And you get a mentor, and your mentor takes you on, you know, like different play dates. You can go bowling or something like that, and they tutor you in your classes and stuff, and they are with you every step of the way. And as you progress, you become a mentor to a first-generation college student. So I thought that was really good, BUT. They do not have *any* African American sororities. And that is *not* gonna fly with me at all (laughing). It killed the whole good idea and everything. And I was like, "Mom"—she knows I am not going to a school without the sorority and everything. If it doesn't have, you know, Delta in particular and so, she already knows. She was like, "Well I guess that's out of the question." If they don't have it, I refuse.

In addition to these experiences, Faith discussed the role of the university-sponsored college-access program in terms of its more detailed and cumulative support. Through the program she went from initial college awareness "in the seventh grade" via the college-access program's First Start initiative for rising eighth graders to "getting the statistics." This supported what she had been raised to believe at home:

> I was taught that going to college was what you needed to do, because—to be successful in life. That was how I was exposed to it, that's what I was told. You know, going to college was what you need to do to be successful. And that sounded great 'cause, you know. And I first started getting the statistics. You know how they say a high school graduate makes this much money that graduates from high school and goes to college versus a person that drops out and goes and tries to get a job. I saw that the numbers were really big for the persons that graduate high school and goes on to college. I was like, "Well shoot, that's what I need too, that's me, that's me all over." And I guess 'cause I have been pushed so much and encouraged so much that I just, I want it so much. Nothing can tell me that I can't go. You can't tell me that I can't go to college. You cannot. No. whether I be [junior college], whether it be junior college. . . . I am going to college. I'm getting up out of here. Uh mm. I refuse to go down that life. So that's what's up.

Faith's expressed determination appeared to be based on her personal drive, familial expectations, and encouragement. In the second section of this chapter, a description of findings is presented regarding how these factors related to her school environmental in terms of information, expectations, communication, and school adult attitudes on the academic and social development of Faith and the other youth of this project.

Hope's Perspectives on Aspirations and Support

Hope is a rising senior in the Elite Magnet Program housed in Bush High School. She is soft spoken and shy. She has intense, deep brown eyes and smooth ebony skin. Her manner is both serious and awkward. Quiet and focused, the tone of our interviews starkly contrasted to my conversation with Faith. Yet, for someone who self-described her shyness, Hope seemed willing to share her insights to an extent I did not initially anticipate. Hope described her aspirations for college in a manner that appeared more personally driven by self-guided goals. She talked less about familial influence and support than Faith did, for example.

Hope's college aspirations were more recently motivated by her desire to attend a foreign extension program of a university located in Philadelphia. I suspected that getting to the point might have proved a better approach towards initiating a meaningful conversation between us, so

following an introduction to myself and the study, I asked Hope about her thoughts on aspirations, its meaning, and scope.

> Having hopes, having dreams that the things you want will come true. I think it [aspirations] is important because you hope to get into college. Most of my friends and I just hope that we can get into college—any college. So, if you don't have a goal, if you don't try, then you don't get anywhere, actually. And like, you put effort into getting this, you put all your efforts towards this one thing—that's what we are going to school for actually. So everything we've done is for putting something into college. I think the schools are there to try to get us to go to college to get a higher degree so we can have more opportunities in life.

Hope described aspirations in terms of a connection of effort where the things that one "puts in" reflected an investment. Her comment described her view of the purpose of schools in terms of a space by which students connected degree attainment with increased life opportunities. She recalled her first thoughts about going to college in middle school:

> I think it was in middle school. I never thought about it in elementary. I mean, I, the main reason I wanted to go to college back then was because it seemed like I was going to be independent, what every child thinks, "Oh I won't be with my mom anymore." I hadn't thought about *what* college, hadn't thought about *major*—it was just, "I'm going to go to college." It's matured over the years [referring to her thoughts on going to college], so.

Hope credited the CAP of this study in part as providing her with support to further her understanding of the college-access process. She discussed specific differences between this university-sponsored CAP and other initiatives that she had experienced.

> Hope: They came with applications. Unlike other programs, they came to you. It's easier access to the program.
> Me: What grade did you start with the program?
> Hope: I think eighth grade [FirstStart, a CAP initiative]. Over the years, I realized the university college-access program was a different type of program. That's all I thought in the beginning was, "They are going to leave soon."

Hope discussed her concern over the amount of money that she perceived CAPs might charge. She shared her concerns that admitting a lot of students into the program would prohibit the program's effectiveness with individuals. I asked Hope what she meant by "different kind of program," to which she responded that she thought the program "would leave soon." She described not trusting the programs to have long-term investment in the students. To the contrary, Hope found that with CAP "you are actually in contact with people and they offer

things in your area." I sought to know what was important to Hope when people and programs were trying to reach her and her peers about college.

Hope: (Thinking) Mmm. If they understand where I am coming from, they get the situation. I mean, if they are like, "Oh, I understand you" but turn around and ramble about something else, I mean I'll *listen* you know—I don't want to be rude or anything, but that's what I think. And they have to be comfortable. 'Cause I am already awkward enough around people. I'm shy. I'm crazy shy. So if they are like, "So," and I am like, "So," it's gonna go downhill from there after that.

CAP reminds you of the things you want to do. They help you achieve your goals in little steps I know colleges want a lot of volunteer hours and they [CAP] give you that. I think they are like a little notepad in my house.

Me: Do you find that it helps to have a lot of "little" reminders?

Hope: Yes. I have memory problems like crazy. I mean, I will forget and then not do something after that. I will forget I have homework, even if I write it down. So for the people that are like, "Oh, you know you have this to do," then I'll probably attempt to do it.

Me: So you like verbal reminders?

Hope: I need it to be in my face or [written] on the wall, "You have homework!"

The incremental assistance offered in terms of constant reminders from the CAP program surfaced as an attribute that some of the students of this study appreciated. I asked about other things that benefited Hope from CAP. She mainly described the attitudes and treatment between herself and the adult CAP staff.

I asked about her future college plans.

Hope: I am so excited. I want to experience life. Japan too, that's a benefit. I am worried that I will not be able to accomplish all the things I have in mind, because I am trying to do everything I had in my mind since freshman year. I have a lot of "I'm gonna do this and this and this." But I have a lot with sports and trying to achieve going to TUJ. Trying to do all this stuff and hope it doesn't come crashing. Hoping it all goes good.

Me: What schools are you thinking about?

Hope: It's TUJ, Japan campus, so ah, I really, really want to go, but . . . I don't know if I am going to get in.

Me: Japan campus? So you are thinking about leaving the country? Wow.

Hope: Yeah.

Me: Why?

Hope: Ok, I am really interested in learning about different cultures, just different people. The main one is Japan—I think, I watched this one show on it in the fifth grade and I loved it. I watched the show like 100 times and I like—and I don't even know why I am interested. I am just drawn to it. I think something will happen if I go and just live life. It's so different from here, I mean I just want to experience culture. And it is an American university, so even if I don't like it, I can transfer back to the main campus, which I'd love to.

Me: What made you think about TUJ?

Hope: Ah, I go into a lot of Web sites looking up colleges in general. And that one had a lot of, like, it had all the benefits. Someone said that, oh, this is an American university, so if you don't like it, you could transfer, like, oh, all the classes are in English but it helps you in—what's the word? Put yourself into the culture. It had all the things, when you think of a college, you want to do. It just had so many positive things to me that, and it's in Tokyo.

Me: That sounds really exciting and very different from what a lot of students pursue—some students struggle with the idea of going home.

Hope: Oh no, I am ready to go!

Me: Really?

Hope: Yes. It's too much going on at home. It's like, starting all over. I want to start all over 'cause for me, I haven't liked my high school, middle school, or elementary years. I mean they sucked. And so, for me to go to Japan, it's like, I get to start all over. Like change my hair, change my—just go and live life there.

Hope's appearance was transformed as described her desire to use college as a fresh start. Her tone was louder, clearer. She sat straight up and unclasped her hands, occasionally using them to convey her excitement. She smiled as she described her aspirations. I asked Hope whether she had been able to make any connections in talking with the school.

Hope: I have been. I mean I really, really, really want to go. So I have been making sure I do everything, perfect. It just cost like $90, which sucks. And I already have everything done, I just need to get to my teacher or the counselor and finish my essay. I just have to wait to January to make an application. In 2 weeks then, we'll see if I get in or not. So.

Me: Do they have a lot of Americans that go to the school?

Hope: Ahh, like 40%. I think—well around the world, so. Yes. The rest is just Japanese students wanting to go to an American school.

Me: Very interesting. So you found out about the program by just researching it? Did anyone tell you about the school?

Hope: No, there was this one guide. This Japan[ese] guide and you know, I looked for it in randomness. It was like, hey, colleges in Japan, 'cause it would be fun, like, you know. I read this little thing, this forum, forever until they finally mentioned like five universities. And I looked at each one of them so a lot of them were either too far away or in the middle of nowhere. I didn't want no country town. Or it was just a bad university. And that one had the best qualifications.

Like her Elite Magnet peers, Hope's narrative described a desire for excellence and good qualifications despite her initial statement that she and her friends "just want to get into college—any college." I asked her how her family reacted to her wanting to move to Japan.

My mom is ok with it. I think she thinks I am going to come back in 3 days and say, "I hate it, Mamma," and just go to like TUSA [a state university] or something. I mean she is ok with me doing it. She made sure that I, like I do chats with them every now and

then. She makes sure I do them. I mean there's nothing really that she can help me with. We talk about majors together. She is ok with it. She just—I don't really know, she doesn't put herself in there.

When I asked about other types of supports that Hope might have had, she explained:

Hope: Well supports, when I tell people, I have chat or something, they'll let me skip that day so I can go talk to them. But actual supports—I don't think so. Nobody is really like, "Oh, you need help doing like this, this, this, this."
Me: Not your teachers, counselors, friends—do you think you will tell them anytime soon?
Hope: (blowing air) No.

Hope said that she didn't share her aspirations and applications for college with others because she feared rejection. This fear of rejection impacted the ways that she handled getting support and its relationship to her academic and social capacity, described later in this chapter.

Keisha and Grace's Perspectives on Aspirations and Support

Keisha and Grace are fraternal twins. Grace is tall and reserved. She appeared to play down her beauty and opinions by deferring to her sister almost constantly, which did not prove too difficult a task as her sister Keisha was assertive and opinionated and exhibited a strong, critical intellect. Grace excelled in sports and described that as her primary path to college, despite her apparent intellect. It was not long before I recognized that both girls possessed the capacity to excel in either academics or athletics. For some reason, however, it appeared that of the two, one had chosen to focus on one aspect, whereas the other sister used another approach. For Grace it was sports, for Keisha, academics. Grace had expressed hesitation at interviewing on her own, so I granted both girls their request to speak to me together. Keisha and Grace were rising seniors in the Elite Magnet Program at Bush High School. Both girls appeared to interact with each other as much as they did with me, often giggling, expressing sarcastic glances, and verbally supporting or correcting one another. Regarding their aspirations for college, they described the connection between their family expectations and their own strivings:

Keisha: Well, I guess to have dreams and goals to try to achieve them.
Grace: Yeah, same thing. You set a goal for yourself and try to achieve it. It may not be as fast as you want it, but you try to achieve it in the long run.
Keisha: We wanna go to college and get all those degrees and then go out and make money and start your life or whatever. Have enough to support yourself and start a family.

Grace: Yes (laughs), because we've grown up in a house where education is stressed, so you can succeed in life in general. In our house you have to go to college, you better go to college.

Keisha and Grace recalled their beginning aspirations for college. Similar to their peers in this study, they had a little trouble pinpointing the exact moment in time when they defined college as a part of the plan, but described the approximate time when college became a part of their aspirational focus.

Keisha: Well, I can't remember the first time, but ever since I was in school I knew there'd be college after. And lots and lots of school. And high school. And I knew that they were going to be some of the best years or worst years and now that I am in high school, they say, "Oh, college are the best or worst years of your life." And so, I don't know, I always felt there would be college to go to after school. And just lots and lots of time spent in school and you have to keep on working hard. And you work hard in high school so you can get into a good college. And you work hard throughout college and hopefully you do something with yourself.

Me: Do you remember thinking that in elementary school? Middle school?

Keisha: It was probably in middle school. Like, teachers are always talking about going to college, so I always knew I was going. I didn't think I wouldn't go to college. And like my parents had been to college so I knew that college was there, they wanted me to go, and I wanted to go too.

Grace: More in elementary, 'cause like, you see doctors and lawyers. I wanted to be a doctor so, like, you have to go to college to be a doctor.

Me: So you knew then that at least if you wanted to be a doctor, you had to go to college. What happened to keep you continuing to want to go to college? Was there support? Did parents talk to you? Did teachers talk with you, have a conversation about college with you as you got older?

Grace: There was one conversation about college, but I always thought I was going to go to college. That's how I felt personally. They helped me to find scholarships and find money and I don't want to take out loans, so that was good, that helped a lot. But I always wanted to go to college.

Grace: Yeah, in elementary, nobody talks about college that much so, yeah in middle school and more in high school. And then there's these programs they try to get you into—

Keisha: (interrupting) Yeah, College Access Program, CAP [Grace chimes in, in accord].

Grace: You know where you want to go. They push you—

Keisha: For like SAT and stuff.

Grace: They pay for things. So it's basically you. If you don't want to go to college, it's you.

Grace's comment appeared to indicate her sense of self-agency and self-responsibility. I asked for clarification, and Keisha said, "Not taking the opportunity, then that's you."

I took that moment to inquire about Grace and Keisha's support systems. They described specific aspects offered by the CAP of this study. Keisha said, "They have math classes, and campus professor talks—I have never been to some, but they *seem* like they'd be helpful." We all laughed and I teased, "They just *sound* like they'd be helpful?!" The laughter came from recognition that both girls wished to provide as solid examples of the CAP supports as possible, even when they did not have consistent examples to offer personally.

Keisha: The ones I went to, getting information on the [financial aid], it's good to know.
Grace: Yeah, (laughter) they come and try to help you. They have a lot of things—they try to get us involved with the program, things that will probably help us. Well, if you need help in math, they have these math workshops where you can go and get help. It's not really anything else other than math—
Keisha: Well, we might be missing—it might be reading and something we don't know.
Grace: Yeah, meeting with professors and stuff.
Me: So it serves as another support? Do you have other things that you do that help you prepare for college besides CAP?
Grace: I used to be in Texas, it was like educational talent search? For Texas State [University]. But like, once I left [the different middle schools Grace attended], I wasn't in the program anymore.
Keisha: Don't you get stuff in the mail, though?
Grace: I get stuff in the mail. Yeah, but I didn't know how you can get into it. It's like, you have to go to some place and do something. I don't know, but having to go somewhere.

Grace laughs as if to say, "That's not reasonable." We chat more about the outreach efforts directed towards her by the educational talent search program. We laugh at Grace's humorous response to the lack of information that she perceived the program to have before Grace proceeded to discuss other programs that were housed within her school.

Grace: Then there was AVID. It would lead to, help you—that pays for SAT and like, I don't think you can be in AVID anymore if you are in Elite Magnet. There is PALS [Peer Assistance and Leadership] classes, all these little groups in AVID. Now that you are in Elite you can only be in PALS now.
Keisha: PALS is an Elite thing. And the principal of Bush—like we were trying to get Bush kids to be in it because we were mad that we couldn't be together in PALS. So, we talked to the principal and from what he has seen he does not believe in the program, PALS just abuse the program every chance they get.
Me: What is PALS?
Keisha: Peer assistance and leadership. *We* are supposed to be role models in the school and be like mentors to younger children. Most of all, role models. I don't know how they pick PALS, but I found out these weren't role models. I was like (sarcastically), "Oh you are some great kids." They are mostly older than me but in class it was not what I signed up for. It was what the principal didn't want. He

was probably right. The mindset of PALS program, and that's what I am going to try [to improve for] next year for the program, but this year—I was just angry—awful. Umm mmm, umm mm—they gotta fix it.

I asked the girls about the types of things they believed to have helped or hindered their process for college in terms of self-belief and parental or other types of support. They discussed parental strategies and knowledge of the schooling status game and its impact on college admissions opportunities.

Keisha: After being in the magnet program since seventh grade, I feel like I worked really hard and want to go to an Ivy League college. Just do fine and come out and be a doctor or lawyer or whatever. But if I go to Harvard or Yale, I get a whole bunch more work for like 6, 10 years, and I am sort of tired (chuckles). I don't know if I want to try and linger or just—well, TU is a good school. Rice, A&M—those are all good schools. I know I am going to go to college. Also they say I could get a scholarship and I want no loans—a full-ride scholarship. Like, sports is also trying to open a door to college, financially. My parents are always encouraging me to work hard in school and classes. They want me to be valedictorian but in Elite, that's really hard. So they were trying to take me out to [attend another high school], so I could be valedictorian. I [could] get accepted to any school, but if I do that, that would be taking the easy route and I would regret that. Sometimes I am like, "Well I have to work hard in college anyway."

Grace: I don't think there were any hindrances except for my own perseverance in my classes (laughter). Yeah, and maybe the teachers don't know how to teach (sarcastically followed by more laughter). 'Cause I don't think I have had the best teachers. I don't think Elite has the best teachers. There might be *some*, like we do have a teacher that went to Harvard, so there's some really good teachers, but there are some that, I don't know why they even want to teach.

Of the various support resources discussed, Keisha and Grace described their perspective of the CAP as being particularly useful for minority students.

Keisha: CAP helps the minority better. They help improve our test scores, math—those are the things that Elite Magnet School overlooks 'cause everyone is supposed to be at that level fantastic. CAP gives after-school tutoring and things like that, so I think that CAP is a good program for kids. 'Cause Elite thinks, "Oh they're [just] smart." Elite works as you are, but CAP builds you up. You have to work really, really hard to be where most kids are [in Elite].

Grace: CAP caters to the minority better.

Grace gave examples of CAP support compared to her in-school experiences. She offered examples such as easier access to the program, fewer obstacles to acquiring support, and individualized assistance in the form of mentoring and tutoring. Both discussed how their

experiences surrounding their supports and school environment impacted their academic and social development, described later in this study.

Craig's Perspectives on Aspiration and Support

Craig is jovial in appearance. He is respectful, polite, and well liked by the CAP staff and his peers. He immediately settled into our time together, and it was not long before I suspected that talking with adults was natural for him. As the class president of the Elite Magnet Program, he described his revolving interaction with school administrators and his peers. His love of music became apparent, especially as he described how he navigated his identity as a Black male in the Elite Magnet School while maintaining friendships with his cultural peers (described during the later half of this chapter), most of whom attended Bush High School. For Craig, aspirations were important, but like his peers, he described the connection to his college supports and goals.

> Craig: Reaching out for your goals and dreams that you really feel strong towards. Whatever is on your heart that you feel like you want to pursue, I feel you should go for it.
> Me: Do you feel like aspirations matter in accessing college?
> Craig: Yes. 'Cause, if you really know what you want to do and what you are going for, then that's your reason. But if you are just going for, there's no purpose for what you want to do with yourself in life.
> Me: So, you think it, aspirations, directs you?
> Craig: Yeah. I think for like my experience that higher education is needed to achieve more in life, to be more than the stereotype—you have to push yourself more so you can be more proud and say, "I did this stuff." It's like the main thing that I think about.
> Me. Think back and tell me the first time that you thought about going to college.
> Craig: Oh. Well, I had heard a lot about it in elementary because, like, everyone in my families are educators, so I come from a family of educators, background of teachers and stuff. And so, even as young as probably third or fourth grade, my mom was telling me that I was to go to college. It was just a term that I kept hearing: college, college. It didn't stick with me until I got older, in middle school, high school, making good grades. That is what really got my attention. My daddy is a college professor and my mom is a third-grade teacher.

Craig explained that his father worked at a Dallas institution of higher education teaching law and criminal justice. His grandmother taught fourth grade at the elementary school where he attended. Craig said, "So, I constantly had a lot of support to keep me in check. (Mimicking) 'Oh your grandson is acting up.' 'Whaaat?'" We both laughed, acknowledging the cultural response that he eluded too. "So I had that support," Craig concluded.

Craig recalled his formal experience with college access:

Craig: I guess when I went to the middle school magnet program. They had student groups, student council, and junior magnet ambassadors for the campus. And they were directing us as to what we needed to do to prepare for college as well as the [CAP]. They were telling us about high school and about college. . . . That's when it really came that I needed to go to college.

Me: From the time that you have been thinking about going to college have there been things to help or hinder you?

Craig: Yeah. As a support, like different organizations, my parents, support groups, ah, support from school, from administrators in keeping me updated with colleges, deadlines, requirements, standards to go there, and my interests. My interests range.

When asked about personal supports or hindrance, like self-doubt or self-belief, Craig described his personal aspirations for college.

Craig: Well, ever since I heard about college, even in middle school, it just gave me a determination. I always told my mom that I was not going to pay for college; I was like I am going to let college pay for me. I am determined to get a scholarship somehow, someway. I am going to get a scholarship someway, 'cause I have money saved. But I am probably going to get me a car with that. But besides that I'm just trying to five myself hope that I can do it. Because I been doing it for years, and so I have to keep on doing it.

Me: So did you think early on, "Yeah, I can go to college"?

Craig: Yeah.

Me: What about support, or the lack of it from adults and your aspirations for college? What have been the responses of your parents? Of your teachers?

Craig: Well, some of my teachers. I don't know. Being African male, some of my teachers thought some of my choices were—if my choices were like Ivy Leagues like Harvard, Princeton, Yale—questioned whether my chances of going there looked good. As far as my grades, they are, but I need to take my SAT, but I don't know. The reaction of some of my teachers was like, "Well maybe you could work harder," which I do need to work harder, but some of them make it seem like it's just impossible and I didn't like that. They weren't showing me much support. But the real teachers who had faith in me—they actually helped me out. "This is what you need to do." They really helped.

Me: Do you still want to go to the Ivy League schools?

Craig: Yes, and if all else fails—TU (laughing).

I found his response very interesting because TU was considered the Texas flagship and was heavily coveted in the state. Yet it was considered a last resort to him. We discussed this for a while before I inquired about his high school counselors.

Craig: It's all the counselors. I know all the administrators. The other counselors also go out of their way to help me. I appreciate and feel really supported as well. I really have connections with them.

Me: And your parents?

Craig: Very supportive. They are the main ones to push harder. I do well in school, but they push me. I know I can do better and they do too, so they always be the main ones pushing me.

Me: How do you feel about them pushing you?

Craig: Sometimes it may be stressful but at the end, it will all be worth it. You know like sometimes, I ain't gonna lie. I need to play my role better but once the grades come out and I am recognized as one of the top students, I am like thank you for what you do for me.

Me: So, you said, "when you play your role." What is your role?

Craig: Being the best student I can be. I go to school, stay focused, and remember why I am in school. Not just to play around, but to get my education. Sometimes I tend to put some things on hold, but once I get through with things, I focus—everything is right again. I think that's the main reason I didn't play football, 'cause everyone thought I quit. But my mom just wanted me to focus on my studies.

Me: How did you feel about that?

Craig: I was kind of mad (laughing). I was really mad 'cause I really wanted to play football my junior year. And everyone was like, "You quit?" and I was like, "No I didn't quit," it was complicated. I had to tell people my mom wanted me to focus and study.

Craig described the role of the CAP in preparing him for college. I asked how long he had been with the CAP. He had been with the program since seventh grade.

Me: How were you introduced to it?

Craig: I think they came to our school one day and—oh, it's been a long time. I think it was like a letter or something, that someone saw me and good and wanted to help me pursue college, so I was like, ok, and tried out.

Me: So you might have been recommended into the program?

Craig: Yeah.

I recapped what Craig has shared about his time with the CAP and ask him if the programs were on site or not. Craig asked for clarification and I mentioned programs related to the CAP and asked about his involvement in an attempt to determine whether his work with the CAP had a direct or indirect connection with his school activities.

Me: Did you participate in preview or jumpstart? Do you mainly get involved with CAP when you were at the academy?

Craig: Both. They do come to our school where we have our meetings. I talk to Mr. J [assistant director and counselor] just for like summer. 'Cause I also was with FirstStart. I was with FirstStart in eighth grade and so I came back the following year to help out as one of the junior assistants. And do, I don't know, I try to stay connected as much as possible too.

Me: So every year you continue participating with CAP?

Craig: Yeah. Since high school I think 2 years in a row, I spoke to eighth graders in FirstStart about high school and stuff. I also like, speak at some of the events and stuff. Maybe about the road, role of college.

Me: How often are you at an activity in CAP?

Craig: Well my schedule is pretty busy, but when Mr. J calls me about upcoming events I try to attend them as best as I can.

Me: What does CAP do for you?

Craig: It helps me, you know, another supportive group to give me information about college x, motivates me to do better in school cause sometimes I probably be falling off but it like, "No don't worry, you are going to pick yourself back up and," which I usually do. Or even higher than I was. Like an extra push and an extra resource 'cause I am trying to take advantage of people trying to help me get to college and resources. So, you know that definitely is one of the things I need so I am trying to take advantage of the things I have to the best I can to get me to that goal. And once I have, I still get more help and more guidance for what I need to do after that.

Me: Is most of your work with Mr. J?

Craig: Ah, sometimes. Sometimes outside of school.

Me: What kind of goals does CAP help you to achieve?

Craig: Definitely another, when I was thinking about dropping out, I was encouraged to stay in, "don't drop out" 'cause it wasn't hard for me, it was just a challenge and well, like helped me with scholarships, give me the outlook of what I need to do to go to college.

Me: It sounds to me like the information that the information that you are getting from CAP and the academy about going to college, what it takes to prepare—it sounds like the resources are a big plus.

Craig: Yes. Especially when you are talking about the SAT and ACT, helped me to get ready that schedule, what I need to do to study for it. That's something they helped me with, I didn't really know much about it. But you know, I remember taking the PSAT, but they was like, "You need to take your SAT your junior year." It's like, well, "I'm not sure." But they helped and encouraged me as well.

Me: Is there a difference between CAP and your high school in terms of helping you get prepared to think about college?

MC: Nah, about the same.

I wanted to know if Craig's school helped even in the absence of the CAP.

Me: In terms of support, what if CAP was not there?

Craig: I think if CAP wasn't there I'd have trouble as far as when to take important tests for me and scholarships. 'Cause at my school they do stress that, but like when I try to talk about scholarships—CAP gave me a jump start before I got in high school, too. With me and my freshman year, not knowing some of the things, scared and then having trouble to understand the teachers 'cause it's—a whole new different environment from middle school. With College Access, um, it like made high school more easier to go through besides the counselors at school. So I think that's like one of the main things from high school. 'Cause we had workshops too. Yeah algebra workshops, that definitely helped me out. And math,

'cause that's one of my weaker subjects, and so by the time my teacher was talking about the lesson, I already knew about it and how to do it. So that was another good thing. It gave me, you know, feeding me a lot of things like "your teacher is going to talk about this" and I was already reading the 6 weeks already [referring to coursework]. So I think that would be the difference.

Me: Early preparation?

Craig: Yeah.

I read a paragraph to Craig about the gap between aspirations for college and the information and tools required to make those aspirations a reality. I asked Craig for his take on the information gap.

Craig: The information is there, but it's a matter of you taking the time out to go get what you are looking for.

Me: Do you see a difference between CAP students and non-CAP students in terms of an information gap?

Craig: Yes. We have the information about things coming up. The others don't have the information that they need or want.

Me: What do you think about the role of aspirations in accessing college?

Craig asked for clarification and I provided examples of what the research used as explanations for Black student underachievement. I asked him about the place of internal drive, aspirations as a young person.

Craig: I think it depends, 'cause some people have not found themselves. As time goes on they find themselves, and some people use that as a cop out, like having aspirations is a good thing, and I think it's important, but it may not be emphasized in someone's life until later on during their lifetime. I think it just depends when they accept it or even decide to push it out. They really have to find themselves and some get confused in the process that people go through. It took me a while to find myself.

Me: I read a report about the link between engagement and supporting the student. At the high school level, do you see a link between encouraging students and their success?

Craig: Yes. You have factors, just going from high school to community college to college, to have someone help you get there is one of the main things that really makes a difference.

I shared with Craig that his desire to discuss self-development was impressive. We talked about his friends who were not in the same mind set. He thought some people had potential but did not realize the consequences of their actions. As an example, Craig shared an experience about another "smart, capable" African American male friend of his who was arrested. Craig discussed why he felt it important to hold them accountable: "You don't want to succeed by

yourself; you want others to go with you. And when they fail, you feel like it is your fault. You feel accountable for that person."

After a deeper conversation about Craig's views as to why students with potential might get sidetracked, Craig offered to policymakers and school adults,

> Don't give up. Even troublemakers need support to get through school. You can't just give up on that person. How do you know if you haven't tried? Some people hold things in and then when you find out what they have been going through, it's like, "Man, I didn't even know."

I asked what he believed the roles of schools should be. Craig replied,

> Not only to teach and give us an education, but to support. Kids think school is boring—make learning fun. We can still have tests, we can still have, once in a while, boring lectures, but make school more interactive in a way that makes kids want to come. I can't say it's all schools, but teachers' styles [are important]. That would make a lot of kids want to come back—you go to school and have that one teacher, like a mentor, encourage you to stay in school or do good in class. 'Cause when you think of students and teachers, it's like that separation. You'd be surprised at how many teachers get close to their students, give them advice, help them out. If we had more teachers willing to go outside their way and students do the same, maybe it would be a better relationship between teacher and students.

Craig described the role of school adults (teachers and counselors, for example) in helping students to succeed. His remarks, similar to the opinions shared by Faith, indicated a shared responsibility that included both adult and student input. I asked Craig about challenges that he faced in the course of preparing for college.

> Craig: Myself at the same time. Because I have all of this motivation and dreams—I want to but then sometimes I doubt myself, like, am I really going to be able to do it? I am pushing myself up but it's like I am pushing myself down. 'Cause it's like I believe in myself less, but then like, after I get myself over, I am back to my normal state, my happy mood. I am ready to proceed and stuff.
> Me: What does it take to get you back into your happy mood?
> Craig: My music (laughing). I don't know why I feel like that sometimes. It's just something that comes over me when I hear people, "Oh I did this and I did that," and it makes me want to do, you know, achieve more. But once I just think about what I can do and think about my music and my whole life, you know. I can just say that I am blessed from other people and I think that's what gets me back in the mood.

Simone's Perspectives on Aspiration and Support

Simone was not part of the CAP. She was recruited to take part in this project at the referral of Craig and is thus a participants nominated through chain sampling. Like her peers who

were participating in the study, she was a student at Bush High School. Simone was a rising sophomore when we met. She described familial support and her school environment as part of the fabric that shaped her college-access experiences. In fact, her mother accompanied her to our meeting spot, in part to drive Simone to the location, but also to introduce her. She was quiet in tone but friendly. She had a youthful appearance; her hair was plaited in thin cornrows. She wore denim jeans and was carrying a book. I welcomed her and Simone. As I introduced the parameters of my research, Simone's mother's questions appeared to reflect her interest in the study's purpose and outcome. For example, she asked about intended outcomes of my work and whether I was looking at the school's role in preparing students. We engaged in a short conversation about her own experiences and her encouragement of Simone to participate in this study. She said that she viewed opportunities to discuss college and the future in general as important and necessary, especially for African American youth. Our introductory conversation provided a good start. Our choice to meet at the nearby location of our shared community was also beneficial. The location was close to where Simone and her mother lived, and it was a well-known, well-utilized spot in the community. We met at the east side community's central museum, a publicly funded center dedicated to sharing the African American culture. It hosted a formal library, a gallery that showcased African American community history, and a performing arts theatre. The former CAP site was within blocks of our selected interview location. Just a few miles further was the university, which housed my office and the high school discussed in this study.

We chose to meet in the library, in a private seating area toward the back of the library, surrounded by thick walls of books. There were two colorful chairs and a low table. Simone and I set up there. Her mother sat in an area to the left of us, separated by a short-stacked wall of books. Simone and I could speak in private but easily could flag her mother's attention if needed. Like her mother, Simone emitted a cool, quiet air. She was polite and warm, and she came ready to talk. I was impressed by her willingness to share her perspectives. Her hair was pulled back into a slightly disheveled bun. She had had on jeans and a thin parka.

Simone immediately wanted to know about life at the university. Because of its flagship status and historically tense relations with the local community, Simone was curious about the level of difficulty involved in accessing the university as well as succeeding there. I shared with her my personal insight and what the research literature said about her concerns. I supported

what I shared with her by telling Simone that I found one of the larger obstacles of minority recruitment to the university was getting students to apply. Simone responded,

> I am smart, but not super, super smart, to whereas I think I can get into [names university]. So it's like, you know the Bush/Elite thing? Well I know I am smart enough to maybe be Top 10 [%] in Bush, but in Elite, I don't think I am smart enough to hang with them.

Top 10% refers to class rank, an automatic qualifier for admission to Texas state universities. Simone described her perception of an existing difference in the preparation of students enrolled in Bush versus Elite and the outcome she expected to face as a result:

> [In Bush] they don't really expect a lot of us, they really don't. My teacher, if she gives an assignment, it's supposed to be due, let's say Wednesday. If the class hadn't gotten the assignment done—she hears it that most of the class has not gotten the assignment done—then she'll push it back 3 weeks maybe, if it's like a big project. And you know, I'm like, "Well." I mean, I could get the assignment due on the due date, but *why*, if I know that she's pushing it back, then why should I do that? I don't know. And it makes me lazy. 'Cause I can pass, and I do pass, but you know I get lazy 'cause I am like "Hey, I got a whole 'nother week." Why pressure myself to get it done now? That's why I don't feel like I'm prepared to go to [a state flagship university] because . . . nobody's expecting anything of me, and then I get over there and everyone is expecting everything of me. I just don't feel like I am going to make it, like I am ready.

I asked what types of support Simone might have. Simone's narrative described a mismatch between her school and her parent's expectations regarding her academic capabilities:

> Now if you would talk to my mom, now, see, *she* has *high expectations*. This is how I know I can live up to the expectations—and she has extremely high expectations of me. And I live up to them and I do what I am supposed to be doing with her. But the school doesn't [have high expectations] and that's why—I just adapt to whatever their expectations are instead of shooting for the stars.

At one point, Simone stated that her mom had considered having Simone transfer into the Elite program. Referring to her mother, Simon said,

> She actually contemplated having me going up there and I considered it myself. And I'm scared, "I don't know if I want to go up there." But my mom, she always wanted me to go up to Elite, especially in my ninth-grade year. I would come back like, "Dude, the class is so easy, ahh, I'm so bored!" And she'd say, "Well if you went up to Elite you wouldn't be bored." And I'm like, "But then I would be too entertained. And I wouldn't want to go up there." Ever since I got to Bush, she has always been talking about Elite. And I've just been like, "I don't really want to go up there."

Because Simone described her experiences in school in terms of lower expectations and limited support, I wanted clarification in understanding what motivated her to pursue college despite her description of low expectations and limited school support. If she was not in the CAP, where was her aspirational drive to access college coming from? Simone thought about her first recollection of wanting to go to college:

> I think it was my ninth-grade year that I was thinking about it and really working hard with my classes and stuff, really like, you know what, I have to do this, and I was really wanting to get an academic scholarship to go to college. 'Cause like I was like, I am not really into sports, the main scholarships.

Simone saw nonacademic scholarships as more typical. This appeared to be a common theme among my student participants, perhaps a symptom of hearing more about athletic avenues to college among Blacks, which has its own implications for racial issues and issues of equality and equity in public schools.

> So I was like, an academic scholarship has to be it. And that's the time, the beginning of ninth-grade year I was dead serious about this and did my best. For the first semester I did my best, and then for second semester I kind of slacked off a little bit 'cause, you know it's second semester, whatever—I was still making good grades, just not as good as the others.

I asked Simone what she considered good grades. She responded,

> 'Cause like to my mom, Cs are an F to her. And she would prefer As. So like As and Bs, 100s if you can make them. She gets mad if you bring in some Cs. I'm like, "Mom, you know I am bad at math, help me out here! Be nice." She's like, "No, you need to do better, bring in at least a B. An A or B."

Responding to my question as to other influences that made Simone think about college in ninth grade, she described more familial supports:

> Simone: Well, my grandmother was a schoolteacher and she was sick, and she passed away, and I promised her before that I would go to and finish college. I know I have to finish it; there is no option of me deciding that I don't want to go. I have to at least go there for my mom to be happy. And my grandma always expected me to go, and when I was younger they were always talking to me about college and getting your full education. And I was like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, whatever, it ain't that serious, I have a long way to go I'm not even in high school." And then in ninth-grade year, I am in high school! I got serious about it. They talked to me [about college] when I was little, little. My grandmother, when she was a schoolteacher would talk to me about it. She always talked to me about it 'cause she worked at my middle school.
>
> Me: If you had to guess, what's the earliest age you remember hearing about school?

Simone: I think around 10 at least.
Me: So elementary school?
Simone: Yes. They did it pretty early. 'Cause she would always give of us stuff—you know, like when the schoolteachers pack up for the summer? She'd always give us that stuff and mess from school [her term *mess* is a way of speech for African Americans and not a slight or sign of disrespect], and she'd always tell us about going to college and how it's important to get our education because—then she'd bring in some history, "back in the days," how they couldn't afford to get their education. I think that is one of the reasons my mom went to college. Because my grandma pushed it, for her to go and always talking about education in the house from what I hear. She did pretty good in school because of that.

Simon shared more about her experiences at school that I reveal further in this chapter.

Shawn's Perspectives on Aspirations and Support

Shawn, like Simone, was not a part of the CAP. He also was recruited through a chain sampling process, at the recommendation of his friend Craig. Shawn is a senior in high school. He identified himself as a student in both Bush High School and the Elite Magnet Program, although a recent official split between the two programs makes shared schedules highly unlikely. There are not likely to be many other students who navigate both programs since the recent change, but Craig explained that his grandmother and the principal of Bush High School are friends. Craig also took courses at his grandmother's nearby college, a historically Black college or university (HBCU), another described benefit of his grandmother's social capital.

Craig and I agreed to meet at a local branch of the city public library, just across the highway from his local high school. I used to live in the area when I worked at Bush. It was a cloudy, rather dreary day when I pulled into the parking lot of the library. In the car next to the spot where I parked, two boys were staring at me. The driver, who barely looked to be legal driving age, was leaning over trying to get a better view of me. I watched as the tall, lanky boy, who had been leaning over the driver side window, made his way across the parking lot to the front door of the library. It was Craig. He was very tall and thin with a lanky walk. He wore baggy jeans and an oversized gray zip-up "hoodie." Beneath his sweatshirt, he wore a white Hanes undershirt. His hair was in a halo-like Afro, brushed back and held away from his face in a rubber band. On such a day, I imagined he had to be cold.

We chatted for a while about how school was going and what Craig had been up to. That prompted a description of himself and differences between him and his stepbrother. He described his brother as "more street" and into athletics, whereas Craig viewed himself as more into

academics. Tennis was his athletic sport. I asked why he considered his brother to be more "street" and how it came to be that the two of them grew up to be so different. Craig offered his answer in terms of a comparative description that led into an account of familial support:

> Let's just say that you take the bus with your brother, but one of you goes home and the other goes to his friend's house. And he's out till 10:00, 11:00 at night type stuff. Yeah. He's still good though, he's smart. He just gets caught up easily. So to say. To me this generation gets caught up easily.

I recapped the intent behind my study. Since Shawn had opened up with a description of differences between himself and his brother, I asked why he thought they took such seemingly different paths despite their brotherhood connection.

> Shawn: I mean I treat him like he's my brother, my blood brother, but technically when you get down to it, he's actually not. 'Cause my dad is dating his mom. So it's kind of a stepbrother type thing. So, he chose his path before he even met me. His thing is the whole sports thing and doing what he does, and mine is the academic part.
>
> Me: What made you want to go into academics?
>
> Shawn: I was raised that way. My grandma is a professor, Ph.D. at [the local HBCU]. I had no choice (chuckle). She kind of raised me a mix of the old-school choice and her way as a teacher. She mixed them together and formed someone of my culture I guess you could say. I guess she taught me to be successful. Like one of those parents where you get a C and it's just, "Aaww!" You get in trouble, break down, stuff happens, your phone gets taken away, you get grounded.
>
> Me: So a C isn't good enough?
>
> Shawn: Uh uh [no]. Heck, to her a B wasn't good enough to be honest. I guess she knew, it's like a parent's intuition and stuff. Parents know exactly what your potential is before you even think about it. You probably sit there and think, "Yeah I'm smart," but your parents know that you truly are smart. And parents know that and tell us that our whole life. And some of us catch it late, some of us catch it early. But, it took me till about, 3 or 4 months ago to realize that my grandmother was trying to help me out. Eighteen years and I didn't figure it out until 3 months ago.
>
> Me: Why do you say that?
>
> Shawn: 'Cause, I mean, most people would probably call it controlling. 'Cause most kids my age that I was—'cause my first public school was Bush and it seemed like all these people [the Bush students] had all the freedom in the world and it's a teenage thing. So after a while I started to feel like I was getting controlled and stuff like that. Like, most kids have to unleash on their parents (mimicking himself complaining), "You haven't been helping me. You are controlling," and all this stuff. But 3 or 4 months ago I was thinking about my life and it just came to me that this whole time she [his grandmother] was helping me. Now I didn't see why they [parents] say, "You might not like it now, you might hate me now, but you will appreciate it —*me*—in the future." Till this day I still pay her [his grandmother] respect, let her know that I appreciate that she brought me up that

way. Whether it was different or not. 'Cause I know some parents nowadays kind of lost the morals, so to say. 'Cause I think that every year, the age of someone gets younger to me. When I started seeing 12- or 13-year-old girls start trying to have babies or actually have one on the way or something, it's kind of weird to me and makes me think that either they have no morals or don't respect themselves or their mom isn't teaching them any morals or isn't around or something. I'm not saying (quick laugh), I am not against the whole not having one family member, not having both parents in their life to make it successful. 'Cause when I grew up, it was just me and my grandma. Well, I'll say it like she says it. It was me, my grandmother, and God, basically. It was basically us three in that house, then after a while, it would still be her and God, really.

Shawn described one supporting aspect of his relationship in terms of being between himself, his grandmother, and God. Even as he was rebelling, he described the relationship between his grandmother and God while he temporarily checked out in rebellion. He described the types of support and consequences that his peers utilize when they have rebelled against their parents or had no sense of familial support to begin with:

> That's basically, that's all you got left really. Most parents—most kids push their parents away. Like you got these girls who go move in with their boyfriends or baby daddys or something 'cause they think it's easier or something. But the minute he beats you up, kicks you out, or he leaves you or something—you aren't going to have anyone but you and that kid that you are going to have to start doing something for, to provide for this child that you decided to bring into the world before you were ready.

I asked Shawn if he had friends that experienced what he had described to me.

Shawn: I have a lot of friends like that. I don't discriminate against people just 'cause they have a baby. I don't see why, it was their choice to do that or not. They still chose to keep it and give birth to it, so—can't discriminate against people because they have kids. Some people just need more help than others. Some people just need somebody. Whether it's a parent, whether it's a boyfriend, girlfriend. Somebody needs somebody with them, that they know is not going anywhere. Some people just need someone to talk to. To be honest, I think me and Craig are probably the only two people that I know that actually conversate [interact] with the whole school. Just, I mean, 'cause me and Craig, we have this level to where we don't discriminate anybody for anything. I mean most people in school—like the popular kids don't tend to talk to the Emos, and the Emos don't talk to the popular cheerleaders—

Me: What's an Emo?

Shawn: It's like a Goth type thing. And it's like, everyone is segregated within their social group. Like, me and Craig—ever since we first met in 10th grade, it like, why discriminate? Everybody is the same person, basically. I see people in the halls—a lot of stuff. And like some people feel down in the halls when like someone says, "Get away from me you loser," or "Bye," or you are like, "Hey,

> what's up?" and people are like [motioning] turn their head, looking around, like they are not even talking or something. And those are the people that people need to talk to. There are a lot of people that need someone to talk to. I mean, I have a lot of guy and girl friends. I mean there is nothing wrong with it. I mean, most guys, they see me as being a playa, having all the females, and I don't see it that way. I just see it as I am the one guy that these females can talk to about guys. 'Cause, to be honest, when I first met Craig, he was Elite-schoolish [referring to the Elite Magnet Program]. I'll say, he was not into the whole—he was rapping and stuff still, but he wasn't into all the stuff that we introduced together.

As our conversation progressed, I asked Shawn about his support systems. He named his grandmother, teachers, and peers as his main academic supports or interveners. He referred to his grandmother's saying:

> It takes a whole colony to raise one person, one child. Ten minds is better than one. And each mind individually crafted to be good in certain things. Ten of us should be able to tackle one project. Like I am good in math and science, Craig could be good at English and physics. Some of us could be good in anatomy, in phonics . . . Everybody could be good in different sections. If one of us doesn't know, somebody out of all of us should know so we can inform each other.

Shawn described a type of friend-based support team to work through academic challenges. He discussed the use of big words and how Bush students used them. He believed that language was important, that using big words helped to capture people's attention, and that "one should talk about what they do know really well." Shawn said that Bush students didn't knock him for using big words because they attributed it to his reputation: "That's Shawn."

I asked about Shawn's aspirations for college. Time was a major consideration concerning his career path. He received college information from his grandmother. About the connection between aspirations and skill, Shawn commented, "If it's something that you really want in life and you have the chance to do it, go for it. A lot of people got to school for careers that they are not good at." Shawn told me the story of a peer with many talents. Shawn's description indicated that this peer possessed the talent to become an architect, but he might have convinced her to pursue one of her other numerous talents. He recounted a story that suggested that students' interests and talents were not always known or cultivated at Bush. Shawn described his peer's dislike of school, and we discussed the possibility of a mismatch between student interests and school preparation, which might have been an obstacle for his peer. Shawn described himself as able to see possibilities in people. I asked Shawn for his perspective on the place of role models.

Shawn: Most people need a mentor, not someone that (he mimics a dull droid-like teacher explaining "quantum theorem" as he called it). When you come in with this new sense of relating to them it [the information] goes this way (pointing at self) instead of this way (pointing past himself). They take it to the head and it makes them really think, "I could really make something of myself."

Me: When did you first start thinking about college?

Shawn: Seventh grade. I wanted to be like my grandmother, go to [a university], get a Ph.D., get recognized. . . . That was basically it, I wanted to be like my grandma. . . . She told me exactly what she did, what school she went to, what she did, how long she was at this place. Matter of fact, I think that same day we went to one of the places and started my college fund. She got it in my head that people with high school diplomas can get certain jobs, but you go on to do your research and then you could be the one person that saves the world from a crisis. You could go to school and make medicine that heals—cancer stopper, make a pill that people can take, make hair growth or something. She got it in my head that I could be a successful doctor or lawyer or something. So that goes for me into the whole college thing.

I asked about other support systems that he had for college. Shawn said,

> It's family and myself mainly. Parents should know that you can't make people do too much. It might be worth a try but it won't work. It is within themselves to have the motivation to do something great. It will be them that is going through it, in the classroom, walking across the stage with the degree. It is self-motivation. You can be motivated by other outside experiences.

Shawn stated that he was self-motivated, to which I asked if he believed that aspirations were important:

> It goes along with morals that you have for yourself and what makes those morals and motivations thrive. You could be motivated to do this, but what puts the wood in the fire is [that which] inspires you and what you aspire to. Motivated to go to school or work or something, but your intentions are what drive that.

Shawn described motivations for aspirations as having the potential to be good or bad, as having the capacity to change: "What you do with your motivations, the actions you take to get there are just as important whether they are positive or not. Some people start drifting." Shawn's statement was similar to my own belief concerning aspirations, college access, and the necessity for creating positive supports and positive environment. I shared with him my knowledge of what the research literature said about an aspirations and the information and action gap. Shawn responded that he had a lot of support in connection with his grandmother's HBCU and from his main peer, Craig. "We talk based on everyone else's opinion and what we think about which schools are good." He asked how they were socially or academically inclined. Shawn said he

looked the colleges up online, but did not do any actual reading of books on the colleges. He believed it very important to speak personally with people to get the truth about what colleges that he is interested in are like. He wanted "someone who knows the deal because there is a lot of false advertising out there."

Section 1 Summary: Consistencies and Inconsistencies of the Students' Narratives Regarding Their Aspirations and Support for College

The narratives of this study demonstrated consistencies and inconsistencies having to do with the nature of their *cumulative* and *comprehensive* supports and interventions. I defined *cumulative* as an ongoing, continuous presence of support or intervention. By *comprehensive*, I meant the depth or broadness of the type of supports or interventions to which the study participants had access. Support and interventions were two aspects of the same capacity building system, where *support* often referred to the people that the participants described, and *intervention* often referred to programs or activities.

Faith's narratives demonstrated the value that she placed on individual agency in connection with her aspirations and goals. She described college as a means for success and as a way to provide for her family. Faith's narratives also demonstrated that she perceived her ability to access college as a common source of pride for herself and her family. Faith linked her personal aspirations with her personal desire to help her family. She used her experiences and interest to help her define her future career aspirations. Faith's narratives demonstrated strong family support via their influence and interaction in a perceived and literal way (for example, conversations with her mother about her career goals). Faith's narratives demonstrated that she utilized a variety of capacity building systems that included familial support and intervention by the CAP and the other programs that she described. Faith's narrative demonstrated that she was exposed to a variety of support systems guided, driven, and shaped by her own personal aspirations and sense of self. Faith described the CAP in terms of the detailed, cumulative support that it provided her.

Similar to Faith, Craig's narrative demonstrated both cumulative and comprehensive support and interventions in terms of his college aspirations. His narrative described early and continuous exposure to college as a goal through his family and, later, from the CAP and his school supports. Therefore, Craig's narratives pointed to both cumulative and comprehensive support systems. His sense of self appeared weaker than Faith's, but solid nonetheless.

Whereas Faith and Craig described both cumulative, comprehensive supports and interventions, Hope's narrative demonstrated a perspective that described a much narrower form of cumulative support or intervention and even weaker evidence of comprehensive support or intervention. She described her cumulative support for college access in terms of an intervening role that the CAP played upon her admission into the program during middle school (see narrative). Hope's narratives, however, emphasized her dependence on herself to access college. Hope described an opportunity to change her identity as a major driving force pertaining to her aspirations for college.

Simone's narrative described an emerging, rather than a demonstrated, sense of self, regarding her aspirations for college. Her narratives offered some (though limited) cumulative support, mainly in terms of her family's influence and actions. Simone's narratives demonstrated limited comprehensive intervention as she was not a part of the CAP. She did not describe the presence of a type of intervention program during our interview.

Shawn, like Simone, was not a member of the CAP but described a strong sense of self-agency in terms of his aspirations for college. Like Simone, he described cumulative support in terms of his family's interactions and influences. Unlike Simone, Shawn described strong comprehensive support that related to his familial ties via his access to his grandmother's college resources.

Siblings Keisha and Grace each exhibited a strong sense of self-agency in terms of college aspirations. Their narratives demonstrated that their cumulative support came from their familial ties and from some middle school experiences in connection to the CAP. Family and CAP served as avenues for their comprehensive interventions for college.

Figure 4.1 illustrates a continuum of the inconsistencies and consistencies of narrative perspectives on the students' aspirations and support for college. Figure 4.1 is based on narrative responses to Section 1 of the findings around three emergent areas: (a) self (agency, responsibility, and drive), (b) cumulative systems (support and intervention), and (c) comprehensive systems (support and intervention).

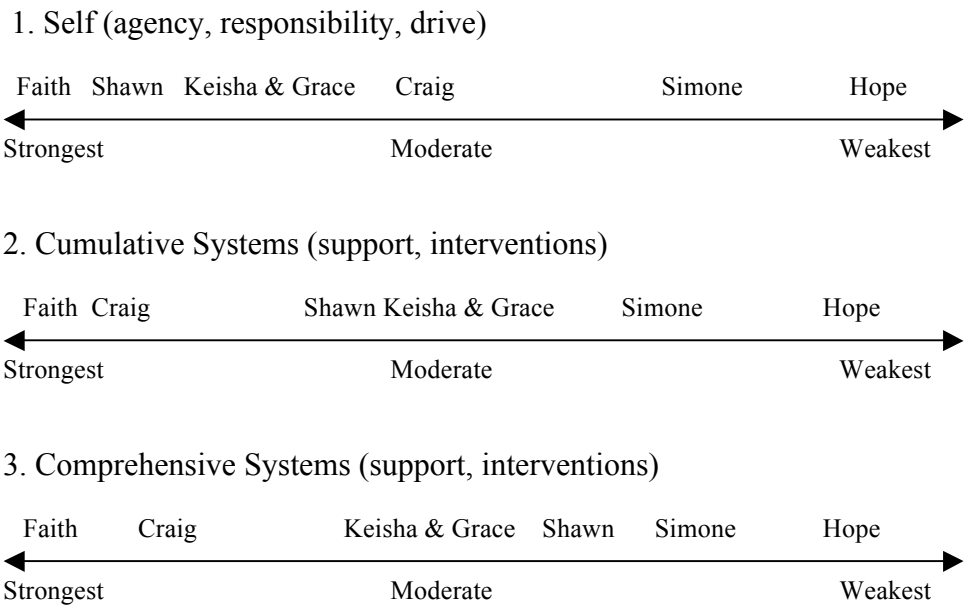

Figure 4.1. Students' college aspirations and support consistencies and inconsistencies continuum.

In terms of the three emergent areas described above (self, cumulative, and comprehensive systems for support and intervention), Faith's narrative on aspirations and support described consistently strong findings among all three areas. Craig's narrative described stronger consistencies in terms of cumulative and comprehensive support and comparably less in terms of self, but the presence of self was evident. Faith and Craig demonstrated the strongest presence of the three areas on the continuum.

Keisha and Grace's narratives on their aspirations and support described a high sense of self and a moderate sense of cumulative and comprehensive support and intervention. Their narratives described stronger areas of support in terms of their familial ties and CAP ties.

Shawn's narrative described a high sense of self (comparable to that of Faith) and moderate to high levels of cumulative and comprehensive support and interventions systems. Simone's narratives described a low but emerging sense of self, a moderate presence of cumulative support and interventions, and weak comprehensive presence of support and intervention.

Hope's narrative primarily described a low sense of self, a low to moderate sense of cumulative support or intervention system, and an even weaker sense of comprehensive support or intervention. I discuss the findings and provide an analysis of their meaning in chapter 5. In

the remainder of this chapter, I present findings about the narrative descriptions on the impact of the school environment on the participants' aspirations and support for college and their academic and social development.

Section 2: Student Experiences With School and Peer Relationships and the Impact on Academic and Social Development

Faith's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships and Academic and Social Development

During our second meeting, Faith described her perspectives on her schooling experiences. She provided a description based on her attendance at several different schools throughout her K–12 career. She recalled her earliest aspirations for college during her middle school years:

> I was in seventh or eighth grade. Really if I think about it, in seventh grade 'cause I went to this—I am not going to say it was this all-White school, but my kind [referring to her race/ethnicity] was very little. So, um, you know it wasn't elite. Actually it was Port Jefferson Middle School. . . . And that was the first time. There were very few Hispanics and African Americans. So I started to talk like them [her White school peers], you know (mimicking an apparent "valley girl" accent), "Totally," and proper and stuff.

Faith described "valley" talk as racialized "proper" talk. What she described was not new or surprising to me. Having shared similar traits and experiences as Faith in middle school, the issue of racial identity, culturally coded language, and its relationship to appropriateness was familiar.

Faith continued to describe other aspects of her schooling in terms of the relationships among aspirations, encouragement, environment, and support along racial lines. She described her perspective about the differences in attending a predominately White school versus a majority-minority school. Of her time at Port Jefferson Middle School she offered,

> But they tend to push you more. I am not going to say that the school is biased and whatever, but they push you more to go to college than a more minority school. 'Cause I went to Pearceson [a high-minority middle school] for eighth grade. And yeah, they mentored you and all that, "College is great," and left it there, all in the air.

Faith's comment described a difference in her middle school experience. In it, she described an awareness that her "more minority" school did not deeply address the route to college to the extent of Faith's former, predominately White middle school. Faith clarified that by "left in the air" she referred to the "part of you [that wanted] to know more about going to college."

Faith's narratives described a distinction between the varying levels of college preparation and support among the middle schools that she attended. Faith's description

indicated her awareness of a distinction between discussing college and preparing for it through deeper action. To determine the extent of Faith's schooling experiences, I asked her about the number of schools she attended. She said she had been to 10 schools, including different elementary schools.

Faith described the change in environment as she proceeded from one predominately Black and Hispanic low-performing high school to another high school with a predominately White and Asian magnet core. That magnet was housed within a school site having a predominately Black and Hispanic student population. Faith spent some time as a student of the Elite Magnet before transferring on to Bush High School. Faith described the thought processes of herself and her peers as they contemplated their transition from middle school to high school and its impact on their opportunity to access college:

> My great friends from Port Jefferson and I played a lot of sports, and there was a lot of talk about what high school we'd play at. We were undefeated until we played [an affluent, predominately White school and corresponding neighborhood]. Their school is so hard to beat. Anyway there was a lot of talk about if you go on in [high] school and play, then the scouts would come out and watch you play and give you scholarships to go to college. There was a lot of talk then—coaches and my peers, my very great Caucasian peers.

Faith's use of the term *Caucasian* to refer to her White peers was a term of respect. It was sometimes employed as a means of reference, putting the person described ahead of his or her racial description. It was not an unusual approach among African American precollege adolescents. It indicated a sense of racial awareness on Faith's behalf. Her conversation supported my observation. To clarify, I inquired as to differences that she perceived regarding schools.

> Me: Do you think there is a difference between predominately White schools and schools that are predominately of color?
>
> Faith: (quickly) Yes. There is a big difference 'cause we tend, we (correcting herself)—they tend to, you know, have more, better teachers you could say as far as caring a lot. I am not saying that Pearceson [staff at the majority-minority school] did not care, but they didn't. So I am just saying in middle school [regarding her experience].

Pearceson served as a feeder middle school to two of the predominately minority high schools, both of which Faith had attended. She spent some time at Pearceson after enrollment at Port Jefferson Middle School. Her attendance at multiple K–12 schools in her district validated

her ability to speak about her observation regarding differences in resources related to the school's racial makeup.

Faith: High school, I went to two minority schools so I can't tell you the difference. (Rethinking her statement) But I *can* tell you the difference because we do have the magnet program at Bush and they do have the better teachers upstairs [where the magnet program is hosted] than they do downstairs [the Bush campus site]. Well, that's what they say. But I love my teachers. They are the best. But we are missing like a couple of teachers this year. It was like five. Didn't nobody want to—this is what I heard. They would rather apply to the Elite Magnet Program than to the Bush program because of how the students are.

Me: The teachers would rather apply to the Elite magnet?

Faith: Yeah. *We* are not different. You know how crazy kids get. There is a small percentage of Black kids in Elite but it's like [mainly] crazy Asian, Caucasians, and Hispanics. And the little White kids are crazy. But they put more emphasis on the bad stuff that kids do in Bush than in Elite. 'Cause [citing an example] we can't spend overnight. You know where you have "overnight" where you have to watch the school when you play Regents [referring to the rival, minority school] and Bush?

At this point, Faith sought clarification as to whether I was aware of this issue. She assumed that I knew about the "overnight tradition" because of my former employment with the Bush school. I asked her to explain for the benefit of recoding and transcribing her explanation for future readers of her story.

Faith: Every year seniors get to stay over, spend the night when we play Regents because we are rival schools. And so, sometimes, all the time, [rival school] will come to Bush and play a prank, and Bush will go play a prank. So, seniors and other staff members stay over and watch the school. We put plastic wrap on the Texas sign. We can't do that anymore because our Elite Magnet students went over and did the little paint ball and BB gun thing and all that crap and we can't do anything anymore. It wasn't because of us. It was because of them. So, we are not so bad, it's just—I guess cause we are you know Black and Hispanic, we just get the bad end of the poll.

Me: That's the perception about Black and Hispanic students?

Faith: Yeah.

Me: So Elite is predominately White and Asian, and Bush is predominately Black and Hispanic?

Faith: Yes.

Me: When Elite students went over to their rival, Regents, did the whole school get in trouble?

Faith: Yes. And we can't do it anymore.

Me: Was this before you guys [Bush and Elite Magnet officially] separated?

Faith: No, it was after, it was just this past year.

Me: How did the Bush students react to that?

Faith: We are very upset with our lovely Elite students. But um, it's all good 'cause we were all waiting on that change, Now that we are seniors, we can't do it at all. Still, and we were waiting on that. But it's ok, we are not going to trip [get upset] about it.

Regarding college preparation, I asked whether Faith saw a difference in how Elite Magnet prepared its students compared to Bush. She likened the Elite Magnet to a private school.

> The academy prepares its students very well. And I say that because . . . Elite is not a part of the First [high school reform] Program. 'Cause they are the Elite Magnet. Basically, if they were their own school, they'd be a private school. You get what I am saying?

Faith's comment referred to resources, purpose, expectations, training, and experiences that she perceived Elite Magnet to have had. Her description indicated that she saw these things as signs of a private school.

> You have to take a test to get inside of it [the magnet]. So Bush is counted in the district but not Elite Magnet, 'cause you don't count private schools. They are their own. It's split. They graduate with us. Everything is still shared, like, with our sports and everything, but it's that they are a different school. And we had to split up because we incorporated the whole First Program in Bush and they are not part of the plan. Not at all.

Faith described her recognition of a clear line of difference regarding the perceptions of Elite and Bush. She referred to the split as being due to the introduction of the First Program. I was familiar with the politics behind the internal split between Elite and Bush. It was not a result of the introduction of the First Program, although Faith's perspective demonstrated a small variation of the truth and the resulting rumors that circulated among some of her peers. Understanding the program provided some insight into current changes that impacted the Bush school environment. At my request, Faith described the First Program as she understood it:

> It's a program and I am going to bring you some history. I was in my history class and found out that [former President] Bush actually brought this program through his act or policy but I don't remember exactly. I remember seeing the First Program and was sitting next to my friend and I was like, "Dude, we do this at Bush [High School]." And she was like, "Yeah, I know." She is in Elite but she knows about the whole First Program too. And it's actually something that [former President] Bush came up with.

I asked if Faith was referring to the No Child Left Behind policy.

> Yeah, that! It's incorporated—you are wonderful [excited that I know the policy]. It's incorporated into that. So we get these different smaller learning communities. You have health science and law—business and technology and performing and visual arts. So each

student gets to choose what you want to be in. And that helps you towards what you want to be when you grow up. So if you want to be a lawyer, anything in the health and sciences, you'd sign up for health, science, and law. And your classes are based on that smaller learning community. You'll take psychology and you'll take something, other classes. You are only taking classes in your smaller learning communities. So, I am in PVA, performing and visual arts, which kind of contradicts what I want to do when I grow up. I want to be a dancer, I love performing and my mom was kind of mad when I didn't sign up for the health and sciences (HAS), but that's what I wanted to do. So, I don't get to take classes with my friends 'cause they are in business and technology, my other friends is in health, science, and law. You do not get to take a class with whoever, with any HAS classes. You have certain teachers that are assigned to health, science, and law. That are assigned to PVA, that are assigned to BT [business and technology]. So, but the lunches are split. Elite has their own and Bush has their own. You do get to see your friends during lunch. But, you cannot take a class with whoever is in a different SLC [smaller learning community]. First thing first helps you towards what you wanna be when you grow up. If you want to be a business person, business and technology is what you want to sign up for. And you stay in that smaller learning community. If you are a freshman coming in, you stay in through your senior year. You cannot change. The one you are in, that's your set SLC for the rest of your high school.

At my request, Faith described other differences between Elite and Bush:

And then the whole difference between Bush and the Elite. I named some earlier, different lunches. We kind of, we get more security at Bush lunch than Elite does 'cause nothing ever happens at Elite lunch. But *we*! *People in jail* [sarcastic phrase to describe the monitoring of Bush students]. Just this year they hired more policeman, like four more. This women that came. I was like, "What is going on?" She wears this big ol' bulletproof vest that says "POLICE." "Ain't nobody going to shoot you! Boo boo [normally a term of endearment but in this case meant sarcastically], do something with your life!" So this women, this big Black dude, this big White dude, and um, somebody else. But we were fine with our two police officers, Officer Nelson and—I forgot his [another officer's] name, he gets on my nerves a lot. Yeah, we were ok, but we did have a lot more fights this year too. So, I don't know.

Faith's description indicated some personal tension in making sense of the differences between Bush and Elite. On one hand, she described exasperation at Bush's receiving more negative attention (for example, the ban on the school overnights and increased security during lunch). Her statement about Bush having more fights indicated that Faith also appeared to be cognizant of the role that student responsibility played as well. Next, Faith described her perspective of the impact of the split's effect on the school environment in terms of her peers.

Faith: And this year, since this was our only, our first time being split up [officially as a school], we had a lot of complaints from the students about the split, and people did different projects. I have actually been on four roundtable discussions on the split. It's been Elite students and Bush students sit down and have discussion

about the whole split. We discuss whether Elite thinks they are better than Bush or how does Bush feel about Elite being—you know, different questions about how Elite feels about Bush and how Bush feels about Elite. We have a lot of different projects. I have been called out of class a lot of times and I am going to need them to put us back together 'cause I have a lot of friends in Bush and Elite is great.

Me: You say that Elite is "great" but you didn't want to stay in the program? [referring to Faith's departure from Elite back into Bush's program].

Faith: No. 'Cause it was hard and it was my 10th-grade year and I didn't want to challenge myself.

Faith clarified that by "not challenging herself" she meant not wanting to overextend herself. She explained,

> I mean I was just coming out of [Bush's rival school] Regents, which was easy and I was coming out of all my classes with straight As. You just go to class, they call your name, bam, there's your class. It was like "Pass," just like that. You might do a little bit of work, but not like *that* [meaning not that difficult].

Although Regents was viewed as a "rival school" by some Bush students (and Elite as well in terms of cocurricular activities), the school's student population is comprised of a similar demographic composition as Bush. Regents faced many of the same issues that Bush faced in terms of resources, reputation, and academic and social development. A common sentiment among Bush students was that Regents had a lower reputation. I asked Faith to describe whether she believed her classes in Bush would prepare her for college compared to if she had stayed in the Elite Magnet. She stated,

> If I stayed in Elite I probably would have had a little bit better study habits. 'Cause I don't like to study, but I do. I have no choice. But I really don't like it at all. I mean, how do you study for one [thing], like really? I am so confused about that, but I pass all my tests. I guess studying is going over all the stuff over and over again. But I think there is some method to studying.

Faith appeared to sense that she needed more academic support in terms of developing her study strategies. She described grappling with obtaining step-by-step methods for accomplishing this and needed a space to work through the strategy. Faith described her study method as "hard and boring, but I do it." She described her method, in which she went over her work "over and over again and try to memorize everything. Is that studying?"

I explained that the strategy of memorization was just one aspect of studying that was not always useful. We discussed talking through material to help learn the content as one strategy.

Faith appeared to like that approach. My other suggestion, which described techniques aligned with block scheduling, did not go over favorably with Faith.

> Me: Are you guys on block schedules?
>
> Faith: (sour expression) Yes.
>
> Me: You don't like it?
>
> Faith: No. It is too long sitting in a class with that teacher, I ref—I think that it was better when you have all your classes everyday, [Periods] 1 through 8, 50 minutes every day, because you have block schedules we only have one lesson a day. The class is an hour and 41 minutes long for one lesson. The next day we do another lesson, we don't review the lesson that we did before. And I tend to forget or not get what happened the day before and we already moved on. And when we do regular classes and stuff, we actually review what we did before and continue with the lesson.
>
> Me: So it's not necessarily the time that bothers you, but what goes into the time.
> Faith: Yes.

I explained that block scheduling was the norm in college and that the idea behind it was to introduce different topics and their interaction: "One of the incentives behind block scheduling at the K–12 level is to provide time and space for review. Do work, review, practice. Review old work, new work is introduced, practice. Get it?" Faith described a disconnect between the intentions of block scheduling as a curricular practice and the poor pedagogical practices that failed to properly use block scheduling so that it benefited student learning: "See, we don't do that, we just continue to *do*—it just kills me. But hey, I got through it. I am a senior this year and I am out the door."

Faith's narrative described a problem between practice and her school environment. I wondered about the schooling experiences demonstrated by this latest part of her narrative. If hers represented a typical schooling experience for African American youth, what impact would such high school experiences leave for colleges to build upon? What types of supports interacted with Faith's schooling to support her aspirations for college? Faith described her school year plans, support activities, and supplemental academic programs like dual credit at a local community college.

> Me: What are your plans for the school year? What does your life look like?
> Faith: It looks like every day after school—well I know for one I have first period off. I am so excited.
> Me: What time is first period?

Faith: Eight in the morning. We have school from 8:00 to 3:30. So I have no first period then after school till 5:00, I have dance practice, and then after that I go straight to work. And then—in school or out of school?

Me: Both.

Faith: Second and fourth Saturdays I have youth day in church and then I have choir at church 7:45 a.m. and 11:00 service. And third Saturdays I have Delta Gem meetings and then, um, every other Tuesday after school I have National Honors Society meetings and, um, hopefully I will be working with [a female development program], hopefully, I am trying to fit it. I put an application in for that. Then I have CAP whenever that comes along; when they send me the whole calendar and then I have ETS—educational talent search that I do, different trips to go on and things to go to. Um, another thing is ACT, another SAT, and scholarship searching and college applying, and sleep—hopefully.

Me: Yeah, when do you get that? (Faith laughs). The last 2 hours out of the year? With applications, are you getting help with that?

Faith: Yes, I am part of this new thing called Urban Break Through Enterprises and their motto is "Break Through to College" and they had a little summer bash last week. It was founded by my mentor. I think I told you she was the one going to get her masters at [university]. Her program helps students get scholarships and help with TAKS [state academic testing] and tutoring. So that helps me. I get a lot of help from CAP, ETS, Delta Gem, and my mom and school and my college advisor (via an in-school college-support program).

Faith described her future schedule:

Faith: All I know is that I have first period off and that is a wonderful thing. I probably will end up taking Pre-Cal[culus]. I wanted to take it over the summer at [local community college] but that was too much. My mom said I couldn't do it with work 'cause that would be too much. So I am taking Pre-Cal. I won't have to take Government 'cause I am taking it now at [the community college]. Then I have to take another science, so I guess I will take Anatomy.

Me: So the classes that you are taking at [the community college] are college level?

Faith: Yes.

Me: Dual credit?

Faith: Yes.

Me: Very good. So how do you find those?

Faith: The government class was easy but I took a class in school and I did a class, a U.S. History and Government. That was kind of easy, you had to go into his class and take notes from his lecture and that's all he did. He didn't use no technology. He just lectured, lectured, lectured. Wrote on the board and stuff though. We had tests every Wednesday—his class was Monday and Wednesday. Whenever we finished the study guide. We had to do a book report for the first semester and a book report for the second semester.

I asked Faith how she thought her dual-credit coursework might compare to her future college work and whether she thought it will have prepared her. She offered a candid response

that demonstrated a disconnect between her high school's academic preparation and college readiness:

> It's not, I think it's gonna be so much harder 'cause I will have to cut things from, uh—I am trying very slowly but surely to prepare myself. I have gotten better. I have actually pushed myself to study more myself for government. I got the textbook for this class and started off. We had to read [pages] 1 through 25 and [names the rest of the assignment]. I went home and that was good, I started off great. I kind of have fallen off now, just a little bit, but I am still on top of it 'cause I will get to read half of the chapter. Then I am like, "Well I'll read tomorrow before school," and I don't get to read half of it. I mean at least I am reading some of it, cause like the old me would be like, "Man, let me read." I'll just copy off [not referring to cheating], study off the PowerPoint. 'Cause he does the PowerPoint. He has a very heavy accent and sometimes we don't understand so he gives us a copy of his PowerPoint presentation. He says he does that for a purpose. Man if he was an English person (laugh) I'd be in serious trouble.

Noticing that Faith mentioned the CAP again in her narrative, I asked her about any potential differences between her supports from the CAP and school relating to her academic and social development. She responded,

> There is because they [CAP] offers more. Like the SAT prep classes, you don't get that at school. And um, like the different—and they help us—our school and CAP—I'm going to give you similarities and the differences, ok? So, CAP and school both offer fee waivers for SAT and ACT. Um, the difference is [the CAP] helps with SATs, we go on a lot of college visits. Well that's the same cause I went on like five college visits with my school [through the separate college-support program, Project Forward]. CAP has scholarships and they bring more people in to talk to us about different, you know careers.

Although Faith cited some of the same examples of the college-access supports as having come from her school (the college trips, for example), I noted that such college-focused "school" activities came as part of a supplemental in-school initiative (Project Forward) rather than as a regular part of the traditional school curriculum. Therefore, not all students had access to the resources that Faith described as part of her "school" supports. This became clear as Faith described differences between her official school counselor and the college advisor hired as part of the in-school supplemental support program, Project Forward.

> Me: Do you feel more supported by one group or another, or does it just depend?
> Faith: I feel supported by all of the groups I am a part of equally. I don't really have a reason, but all of them support me. Our college advisor does a good job, but my counselor. I don't really like my counselor and would really love to switch my counselor.

Me: So what's the difference between your regular guidance counselor? By your "college counselor" are you referring to Project Forward?
Faith: Yeah.
Me: Ok, so what is the difference between what she does [college advisor] and what he does [high school counselor]?
Faith: Everything. [College counselor] does everything, my guidance counselor does nothing. For me, he does nothing for me. She [the college advisor] makes sure we prepare for SATS, makes sure we sign up for ACTs, makes sure we take a lot of college visits and she makes sure that—she did bring in—you know how I told you I wanted to be a pharmacist? She brought in the health care people and um, she—she's cool.
Me: Describe your high school counselor. You go [are assigned] by last name?
Faith: Yes. No last name and SLC [academic program].

Next, we continued in a private conversation that Faith believed would help me to further comprehend her perspectives regarding the differences between her high school counselor and college support advisor roles. At Faith's request, this specific aspect of our conversation is off the record. However, it was clear that Faith viewed the Project Forward advisor's initiative to check in on her as valuable. If Faith's peers who aspired to attend college faced similar issues and had to rely on the high school counselor, what did that mean about the extent of support they received through their school?

Faith described her perspective of the difference between her high school counselor and her college advisor, offering *formality* and *care* as two major assets.

Faith: The college counselor is supposed to recommend you for everything, well, they are supposed to give recommendations and stuff and um, suggest different things, different options. Something like a college advisor but he is supposed to be. The guidance counselor should be more formal with what you do. [The college advisor] is more informal. She is more personal with us and stuff, and so um, he [referring to her school counselor] doesn't do anything.
Me: So, is his work [high school counselor] broader? And the college advisor is more focused on preparing you for college? [Faith agrees]. But he is supposed to talk with you about college?
Faith: Yes.
Me: What does he [the high school counselor] say about college?
Faith: Nothing. Not nothing. Nothing at all.

Faith described her assigned high school counselor as uncaring and disinterested. While we engaged in this topic at length, the conversation was not described at Faith's request. Faith described having access to other high counselors and supportive adults whom she viewed as positive models.

> Mr. R is really nice. He took me and my mom home, twice (laughs). That's when we didn't have a car and he was really cool. Coach H, I didn't really know him at the beginning of the school year but he was up in the hall (mimicking him, "Hey!" I was like, "What?" (Faith sounded intrigued). But I got to know him better during the school year. And when I see him in the hall, "Hey." I mean, I might not know him, like personally, but he is really cool. Ms. E, she always dresses really nice and I always tell her. She is a pretty woman, she's cool. Mr. L [the high school counselor she is not found of], he can kiss my toe.

At her statement we both laughed and I was somewhat amused with Faith's creativity in expressing herself. She seemed pleased that I recognized her style and told me so. She compared my recognition of her to that of her friends who she said teased her about her take on things. She clarified that it was done in a "in a friendly way." We discussed her peers and her status among them. As she shared more about herself, Faith used the term *confrontational* to describe her personality. I asked her if she really meant confrontational or that she just stood up for herself. She explained,

> Speak up for myself and anyone else who is getting downed. Like, I tend to be there for my friends a lot when—there's a friend. She is like my best friend. She just graduated this year. She thought she was never going to go to college. I never stressed it to her because she has wanted to go to college, but she has not had, um, the support from her family or—the only support that she has had was from me and my best friend. She was like, "Well I graduated, yeah" and she works at [a grocery store] and stuff, and she was like, "I am not going to worry about going off to college." I never, like, stressed it to her 'cause it kind of hurt her feelings or whatever. And when I tell her, "Oh I went to visit so and so," and whatever [referring to college visits]. She has been on college visits. But if I tell her, you know, "I am a part of this group and this group, and they help me do this and this," she kinda gets a down face. But she's like, "Oh that's good, Faith. You know so and so, so and so," but you could tell that she was hurt.

Faith's narrative indicated careful consideration that peers can have of each other. Regarding accessing college, Faith recognized that her friend was in a different situation. By "not stressing it," Faith described not pushing her friend, although she was clearly concerned about her. This friend of Faith's ended up getting accepted to a private college in Texas. Faith described sharing her friends excitement but also further concerns about her lack home support for college:

> "Like girl, you better get it!" [a cultural idiom of encouragement]. And she was like so excited and her mom was supporting her, but telling her she doesn't want her to leave. But I just don't understand that, I mean. I don't know. You want to stop supporting her now? [Faith is talking about her friend's mom] but, *I guess*. I am happy that her mom is happy for her too.

Faith's tone indicated that she was clearly grappling with her friend's mother's tepid support. Support appeared an important issue for Faith and her friendships. Faith described the trials that her friend had undergone and how she perceived her identity among her peers:

> 'Cause she [her friend] felt like she was alone. My 10th-grade year and her junior year. She had a rough junior year 'cause she was dating this guy and uh, he was just up and down with her, you know. And I would miss class a lot because I had to, I feel that I am obligated to be there for my friends. It is my duty to be the strong one. They have never seen me cry except for like last year, this, my junior year that just passed. I don't like to show my feelings to my friends 'cause I feel that I have to be the strong one. I mean, I'm sorry, I have to be the strong one to, you know, keep it together. So she knows, I done found out the bad part, crying on the phone.

In another off-record conversation, Faith explained some of the problems that she helped her friends work through. They were challenging and emotional in nature. They sometimes diverted her attention from her studies. Faith described having to put her schoolwork behind the needs of her friends as "little bitty" sacrifices that she "had" to commit to. I asked if they were still friends, to which Faith confirmed and stated her excitement for her friend, whom she felt was there for her as well. She said it was the first time she had ever cried in front of her friends. She was clearly put off by her public show of emotion.

> Me: What do you think is going to happen if you cry in front of your friends?
> Faith: Nothing, but like, I—(she grapples with this).
> Me: Do you think it shows weakness?
> Faith: No. (Rethinking) Yeah (sheepish laugh).
> Me: So what do you think when you see your friends cry in front of you?
> Faith: I don't think they are weak. I just think they are hurt. It's just a sign of weakness for me.
> Me: Just for you.
> Faith: Yes.
> Me: Nobody else?
> Faith: (Another sheepish laugh) Miss Danielle, what do you mean? What are you trying to say? What are you trying to get out of me?
> Me: (I laugh softly with her because I understand her position as someone navigating strength and being human.) Nah, I am just saying, it's not a sign of weakness.
> Faith: I don't want them to—really I don't want them to worry about me, that's all it is. I don't ever want them to worry about me. 'Cause I can handle (drifts off). . .
> Me: You can handle yourself? Is that what you were going to say?
> Faith: That's what I was going to say. You know, sometimes I can, but it all depends on the situation. They will never see me cry over no boy, never, ever. (She's talking half to herself, half to me, perhaps.) I am the stronger woman.

I repeat Faith words and she repeats them back as if to confirm.

Hope's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships, and Academic and Social Development

Like Faith, Hope described how she ended up attending her high school, the Elite Magnet. Hope attended the same middle school magnet as Craig attended.

> Hope: I applied [to Elite Magnet], my friends were applying. That's the only reason I went to that school—the only reason. Because a majority of my friends were there. I mean, I didn't like it. I still don't like it. But it's better to go somewhere where your friends are. I just applied—and I usually don't put effort into everything because I get everything, it's really easy. So they accepted me and I was like, "Hey, I guess I am going."
>
> Me: Did your friends come with you from the same middle school?
>
> Hope: We all came from middle school together—elementary, middle school, and then half of my friends went to this school [Elite] and Bush, and then my other friends were split up into little schools, and so. I went with my main friends 'cause—I was gonna go to [another high school in the same district] 'cause it just seemed like an interesting school, something fun. But I mean, I rather just be with friends and if I had trouble, I could talk to my friends about homework or something. Instead of going somewhere, having to make new friends, start all over.

Hope's narrative demonstrated the importance of keeping friendship ties from her earlier school experiences. Hope's description indicated that faced with having to choose between her friends and her school environment, she selected attending the same school as her friends as a form of ongoing support. In order to get a sense of her perspective about her peer-or-school strategy, I asked Hope what her friends thought of their experience at Elite. She replied,

> They hate it, we hate it. You learn, but the environment. There's no fun. We have like four pep rallies even though there are 10 games, the lunch is changed, you don't have a lot of time to see your friends. Some of the teachers are just ridiculous. I mean, they're smart but I just don't like them because they are so rude sometimes. Their teaching ways [pedagogy] are just so hard, it's just everything put together [referring to the student schedules]. The lunches, they're ok. We get to see our friends. The security (sighs), everything builds up in that school. I just wonder—I just really don't like it, that school [Elite].

I noted that Hope independently used the same term, "ridiculous," that Keisha and Grace used to describe their teachers during my interview with them. I asked Hope about the term. I asked what about the teachers was ridiculous. She responded by providing examples based upon her friends' experiences.

> I never had this teacher but every one of my friends had her. I had the same English teacher every year except for sophomore year. And this English teacher was new. And she was so—*horrible*. She assigned work for every little day, like essays due the next day

> and stuff, and then she kind of had mood swings, like crazy mood swings. And no one liked her 'cause she kind of snapped on students. She kicked him [a student] out for absolutely no reason. And she was so strict that if they spelled her name wrong, she took off points. And this is high school. I mean it's understandable. I mean, her name is kind of weird, I mean I can't spell it. It's just, why act that way, you are in high school. A high school teacher shouldn't be acting that way. There's teachers like that. Some teachers—I took German and I would have kept it, but this teacher. She aspired for us to do great things. We had quizzes each day and she expected us to get 100%. And the freshmen, they were really smart, and so they are like, "I did this really fast," and then there are the rest of us who have gotta like, "*Actually, let me study this for like a week. Let me memorize this or something.*" But she always viewed us as capable and so she assigned work after work after work, and like the next day on to a new chapter and the next day on to a new chapter, and I don't think she understood that most of us needed time. Some teachers don't understand the students very well. I guess.

Hope's narrative described a disconnect between teacher expectations and available student support. Hope clearly recognized that her teacher "aspired" for the students "to do great things." However, the gap between teacher expectations and student assistance hindered the process of student learning. Hope referred to some of the Elite teachers as "smart" "but rude." Her comment indicated a problem of communication and was supported by Hope's observation that "everything builds up in that school."

Of her perspective on differences between the Elite Magnet and Bush High School, Hope stated,

> Well, I don't want to say Bush is easy, but it is. It's way, way, way easier. They get free AP testing. And for me, I pay full cost, which I don't think I should. That's $50 a test. And their classes—they get paid. They have a motivation. And for us, if you make an A, "congratulations," but your grades can drop next semester 'cause the classes get harder. Bush has a lot more opportunities I would say. And I guess that because they, I don't know what they call it. The students from the neighborhood? They go on, and they view that they need more help than us. It's just that the have a lot more opportunities and they have more motivation. Us . . . It's like, what's the point? I'm not going to do any better than I am now I gave up, I will study and then fail and I am, like, ok. I mean if I had a motivation, like "I am gonna get $50 per test," then I would take it more seriously. But in Elite, the only benefit is that some of your teachers are cool, your friends, and hopefully you'll make a good grade and hopefully you'll make an A. But none of it ever happens.

Hope's narrative indicated her perception of grading stratification and seemingly impossible upward mobility regarding grade attainment in the Elite Magnet. When probed further about what she meant by "motivations," Hope responded,

> None of us, until recently, thought about college. We are just now starting to think about it, 'cause they are just now starting to bring it up to us. The school, our counselors—since

> Elite just started [by] itself last year. So now I am starting to get my grades up. But now, when I look at the minimum for the school? I just want to get my grade to that level so I have a chance of getting on [to college]. I don't want to overexcel and chance it. Cause it's a lot of work, and if you don't get in? So.

Hope's narrative indicated that she thought of her efforts in terms of the returns that she might receive. Her quote indicated a trial-and-error strategy to navigating schoolwork. It appeared that she believed that her hard work might not pay off, which curtailed her motivation to achieve to her highest capacity. As we proceeded, Hope's narrative indicated that her fears of rejection and failure were issues that impacted her ability to reach out for and receive support. Risk without payoff was not attractive to Hope. I wanted to know more about the issue of support for Hope, so I asked who served as her school-based supports.

> Hope: Nobody (chuckle). I don't know, my teachers? My mom, no, because she doesn't know anything. She only went to college 6 hours, so and the application..
> Me: Do you assume she doesn't know or you know?
> Hope: Well, coming, like every now and then, I'll be like, "Hey, help me edit my essay," and she'll be like, "Oh, you should do this," and I'll be like, "No, edit it—help me make it better." So, she does the basics for me, and then I need someone who is like smarter than that, like a teacher. And the teachers . . . I mean, they don't really help me when I have problems. My Japanese teacher does. I'll tell him about my problems—but nobody likes him (she adds quickly) so, I don't know if that helps me any. [I ask for clarification]. Students, they really don't like him. He just listens and that's all I need really, just a listener. He just listens to me when I complain, or like when he has problems himself, since a lot of students don't like him. His first year was 2 years ago, and I knew from the beginning he was going to suck, and he did. Like, the students despised him. I kind of took it as my job to help him.

Hope's narrative indicated that she had specific ideas about the type of support that she needed. She viewed her mother's contributions as limited because her mother did not complete college. Yet, she looked at her Japanese teacher as needing her help. From him, she required his support through listening. During our conversation, I thought it interesting that Hope had a good rapport with the very teacher who seemed best able to assist her with her aspirations to attend the Japanese extension university. Hope shared a past experience where she did not receive a study abroad scholarship and the impact that it had on her desire to reach out for help as she applied to college:

> Hope: And I don't think I will take rejection well if I don't get accepted. I don't want to tell people, "Oh, I applied" and then didn't get accepted, so. I rather keep it a secret so no one knows that I didn't get accepted into the college.

Me: But you know that that is part of the college process?
Hope: I know but other people, I—it's hard not getting accepted into something. Like my first actual rejection was the scholarship from the program to go to Japan. Oh! I was so mad at myself because you try your hardest to get there and you don't know. It's like, "She was in line for the scholarship and didn't get it." So I don't like telling people, "Oh I didn't get it. I lost."

For Hope, "not telling people" included her Japanese teacher. However, Hope described him as someone that she found "useful" and who would "help" her apply to the university in Japan. Hope offered that she "kind of told him."

Hope: I mentioned it, hinted at it like, "Hey, what about this program?" but I never gave him a recommendation letter for teachers.
Me: And this was again, because you were afraid of what?
Hope: Yeah, rejection (sheepish laugh), I didn't want him to know that I applied and got rejected, so.
Me: But he's offering to help you?
Hope: Yeah, but stiiiill [drawing the word out to emphasize it]. It's awkward now—seeing a person you thought was rejected and they are just sitting in the class.
Me: Do you think he's had moments when he applied for something and didn't get it?
Hope: No, I don't know. . . . Of course people get rejected. You just wonder what they think about you, I guess.
Me: What do you think about people who get rejected?
Hope: I never really thought of it. If I get rejected, like, it lowers your confidence like crazy. I took my mind off of trying for a year. So, I don't know what people think of people who got rejected. I wonder what they thought of that day?

Hope and I discussed more hypotheticals surrounding college access rejections and Hope's impression of a friend who did not make it into a given college. Hope believed that if all but that one friend did not make it in, it would reflect poorly on the friends of the girl that she described.

Hope: I wouldn't call her a loser, but I would help her try again. But if it were just this one college that no one else is going to, then I'd be like, "Who cares? Just apply to the one we are going to." It just depends.
Me: Do you know why some colleges reject some students?
Hope: It depends on how many students a college can accept, but you are not thinking about that. You think, "They didn't want me for my essay or my SAT score." I think every person thinks about the horrible reasons first and then years later they think about the rest, "You know what? Maybe they just had enough people."
Me: What are your friends' attitudes towards college?
Hope: I'm the most pessimistic about it. We are all like, "We're not going to get into college". We really don't think we are going to get into college. 'Cause we are dumb compared to all of the students in our school. I mean, a 4.8 [grade point average]—if it was a 4.4, maybe I'd feel smart, and I have a 3.3 now. I feel

stupid, I really do. And my friends—some make lower, some make higher. And so, we don't think we are going to get accepted to even the worst school, that's sad. It's just 'cause I do bad on tests. I'm like, "I'm not going to do good in college if I can't do good here."

I asked whether she spoke with her teachers about that. Hope explained the complications of communication with the teachers and how that adversely affected the success of tutoring opportunities. Peers seemed to be an important element in Hope's narrative. I asked Hope to describe her friends. She described herself and her friends as "jocks" because they are athletic, dance, and are popular in school. She described the inner working relationship of her friends complete with many of the typical teenage tensions and considerations. She described her group as negative "but with smiles on."

Hope: I guess I don't want people to not like me. I mean, then you wonder why they don't like you. So I tell people what they want to hear. Even now, with my closest friends. They don't know a lot about me. They know my past, but not what I think. They think I am really fake because over the years I have become what my parents want me to become in a way. 'Cause you don't want them to see the obnoxious—'cause I am really weird at home. I am weird about by myself sometimes. And I just want them to see a normal girl who tries to get their friends to hang out, but it never works out.

Me: How do you know that you are "weird at home"?

Hope: Compared to my friends, I'm weird. The way I act at home. When I am on the computer I am like little geek, nerd.

Me: What's weird about that?

Hope: Like society, you don't want to be an outcast. In society, I don't want to be alone. So, you know, you—I'm weird. It's just the way I act is kind of different from my friends' actions. And even though my friends are like me in a way, it's so many years that I have hid it, that I can't bring it out. Like my friends dance in the hallway—I cannot bring myself to do that. I can't dance. You don't want to embarrass yourself so.

Hope's narrative described a relationship between her identity, peers, and school supports for college.

Keisha and Grace's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships, and Academic and Social Development

Keisha and Grace offered detailed insight about their school, peers, and life between the Elite Magnet Program and Bush High School. They began by describing their experiences as African American students in the Elite Magnet since its official split from Bush.

Keisha: Most of my [Bush High School] friends are like, "Go back upstairs" [where the Elite site is housed] and, "Y'all think you are so smart" and "You think you are better," and—

Grace: And African American—it's not that many boys. So the girls—you are either, I don't know, this little White girl upstairs. Or the girls that all try to go downstairs whenever they can to try to keep their, to look like, "Oh, oh these White kids! I'm a go downstairs to keep, you know, whatever." I don't know (Keisha laughs dismissively).

Keisha and Grace's narratives described Black females at the Elite Magnet trying to hold onto their sense of belonging with the Bush population, which they perceive as their "real" peers. They described what appeared to be other student's attempts to stay "real" and remain valid among their original and cultural peers. Craig's interview supported this and is described later in this chapter. I had a suspicion about the girls' attempt to remain valid to the original cultural peer group with Bush students.

Me: Still cool?

Keisha: Yeah (laughing).

Me: So there is tension between African Americans depending on whether they are in Elite or Bush?

Keisha: Well this year, there is because of the split. Before, when we were all together it was cool. It wasn't anything. There might be jokes. We might joke with each other, but it seemed sort of vicious after the split.

Grace: Yeah, it's the same thing, um, but, like the, um. I don't think there is as much. There is a tension between us, but they like—some of my friends from Bush will make jokes and like, "Whatever," or like, "Shut up" [Grace's sentiment]. And I don't know why they are telling us this stuff, because the only reason why we split is because Bush got a whole bunch of money. For the First Program, and now we don't have any money.

Grace's description indicated that she felt that Bush High School recently received more resources than the Elite Magnet. Her suspicions appeared to focus on differing supports for African Americans enrolled in the two different programs.

Keisha: And everyone says that we [Elite Magnet] took the money, that we have better classrooms upstairs and stuff. But the way I see it, their principal [Bush's]—I don't see what the problem is, they have all of this funding. I mean so. They have books, computers . . .

Grace: They go on field trips and like Six Flags and all of these college trips to go to the colleges. And we are the ones supposed to be going to college and—

Keisha: But, it's a good thing that they go on to college 'cause they are trying to encourage them, but I feel in Elite they forget that there is a group of us who might need more help. The thing is that they feel like we are up at the top, like, and [for those in Elite] at the bottom it's like, "Oh, don't worry, everyone is going

> to college." But for some [students in Elite], they really don't know if they are going to college.

Keisha's comment expressed powerfully her perspective about the need for ongoing, deep student support. I asked if only the Black students required more help, or if it was a broader concern. Keisha replied,

> The Asian and White kids are doing all fine, and some of the Hispanic and African American kids don't feel—like, I don't know, the Black girls—a few who wish there were more resources and teachers to help. But they let you do whatever and you don't understand or you're in the Elite program, so what do you expect? [expressing her sentiments of adults attitudes towards students needing help]. I'm fine, but some of my friends are not sure about being in Elite, wasting time in Elite is what it seems like.

I asked for clarification on the remark, "You're in Elite, what do you expect?" Keisha explained,

> Well, the teachers. Well, sometimes you have to buy books, and you can't afford to buy the books. You say, "Well, I can't get the book," and the teacher is like, "Well, get the book." And you say, "Well, I can't get the book," and the teacher says, "Well, you failed the quiz," so. And other kids, if they really wanted to, could go to the library. But these books, they are really hard to find sometimes. They don't have the money so we just trade books: "You have class next period? Here you go"

Keisha said this in a matter of fact tone. I expressed my horror at the system that students are forced to navigate with an "Ummph." Keisha continued to talk while Grace laughed in the background, undoubtedly as a response of recognition and disgust at the system that these students are forced into. Keisha stated, "You gotta help each other out."

Keisha's comment indicated expectations of agency and self-direction, but also recognition that there were circumstances beyond some students' abilities. I asked about differences between the teachers of Elite or Bush and the curriculum. Keisha answered,

> I don't know. Like the Bush kids say we have better teachers, but then like, I go to some classes and the kids aren't doing anything. I don't know if it's the teachers that aren't doing whatever. Maybe it's the kids that don't listen to the teachers, but I don't think we have better teachers. Like all teachers, well, some teachers, teach 'cause they love teaching—wanna change students' lives and stuff. And I feel like if they listen [the students] and try to get that help, then like, I wouldn't say we have better teachers. Like everyone got their degree, hopefully.

Keisha's narrative demonstrated a sense of blind faith. She expected that all teachers came from the point of wanting to teach all students and that they were all equally, perhaps powerfully skilled. Grace stated,

> I don't think we have better teachers. There is only one teacher that we got this year that is like—in our English class that like, she didn't—I don't know if we didn't have the books she wanted. Or the books we had at Bush as a whole, and then when we split, they got the books cause it's their principal [Bush]. So then we had to go order and whatever. But that particular teacher in general was hard and strict on everything. Like, if you failed a quiz, you failed the class (incredulous laugh). And I don't think our [Elite] teachers are better 'cause like they got fired last year, and then when [the whole school] split, now they are teaching Bush (incredulous laugh).

I asked for clarification and repeated what they just described. The girls confirmed.

> Keisha: They are not better.
> Grace: That's bad though, the teacher got fired from Elite and goes down to teach at Bush? (More incredulous laughter between the girls.)

I asked Keisha and Grace about their descriptions, positioning the Elite program as literally on top, or upstairs, and the Bush school as down, downstairs. It appeared to impart a "better than" position between the two programs. Grace described differences in student attitude as relating to this structure. She discussed this to address some of the school differences.

> Grace: Like, some of the teachers might be more lenient because of the way the kids act in their class. They [the students] are like, "This is hard, why we doing this," blah, blah, blah! While like [in Elite] the students are like, "Oh, we don't want to do this," but like, they are going to do it.
> Me: Why is that in your opinion? Why are they more likely to do the "hard stuff"?
> Keisha: Well, we came to Elite for a reason. That's pretty much the difference between the Bush students and Elite.
> Grace: They can be doing their work downstairs. I have friends who are in the Top 10 [% of the class]. . . . One of them is valedictorian this year. Like all they do is do their work. They just sit there and do the work. It seems it's so easy. It seems like with the split it got more easier and then I hear, they are like–some of the kids are not graduate–some of the kids are failing and I'm like, "why?" The curriculum got like *way* easier—it's not even funny. I don't even know. I don't even know.

Grace and Keisha's descriptions left me curious about the value of expectations and how it played out for students. It appeared that Elite Magnet students were placed in a culture where "doing the hard stuff" was expected. Bush students appeared to be placed in the extreme opposite culture. Keisha and Grace's descriptions indicated that both groups lived up to the cultural environment and expectations about their academic abilities and achievement.

> Me: I keep hearing this theme about the curriculum being so much easier in Bush than in the academy, and it seems like all of the students know it, and I get the feeling that the faculty is equally aware of this. What do you think that's about?

Keisha: Well, you mean, like Elite? 'Cause we are supposed to have harder curriculum. Getting way easier and people are still failing [referring to Bush's curriculum]. 'Cause I think the point was for kids passing. But it seems like it got even easier, and then they *really* [Bush students] didn't want to do the work! They are failing and I don't know why.

Me: So how did the students take to the idea of the split between the schools?

Keisha: In the beginning, nobody wanted it. Like last year, "Why are we splitting? We like each other." Nobody liked it, nobody. And then last year, they just went along with it and then there goes the little arguments or remarks—even a tension between the teacher—

Grace: OH YEAH!

Me: What tension, what do you mean?

Keisha: A teacher—when our copier was broken, he took his kids downstairs [to Bush] and to make copies. And someone told him to "get back upstairs"—seriously. This was their copy room and they [Elite] couldn't use it or something. And it was, when I heard that, I was like, "That is pathetic," why are adults acting like that? But it's like one instance. And I think the teachers are telling the kids, "Yeah they think they are better upstairs," blah, blah, blah. I think it's teachers telling them that because they knew us before and some of the teachers do say things to people. They do.

Grace: There are some teachers we've seen all the time, we had classes upstairs and downstairs, in the portables [before the split], we used to see people all the time and then don't see us anymore, they are like, "Oh." When they see us going up the stairs they are like, "Oh, you are *those* ones! You're in Elite." So it's just like stupid things.

Me: Teachers say this to you?

Grace: Yeah. [Keisha agrees.] Like—

Keisha: Used to be friendly, not anymore. [Grace agrees.]

I ask if they still have friends attending Bush and how they respond to the girls.

Keisha: To me it was lots of tension, "Get back upstairs!" Blah, blah, blah. You know? That's how it was, like the track team. It was lots of tension. And I felt it was because of the split. And like, they said we wasn't coming downstairs to visit. But no one was coming upstairs to visit! So you smile in the hallway and people keep walking. I don't know what they expected.

Keisha: Even some of the coaches were like, "It stinks up there," or like, "It's a jungle up there, they be walking around with no shoes!" (snickering). "So get back downstairs!" (more teasing laughter).

Grace: There's a lot of crazy kids in Elite. That's all I gotta say, but . . .

Keisha: YES!. The teachers don't want to be there—even at Elite. It's just their attitudes. It's a little too carefree, like, just do the work. No interaction between the teachers and the students.

Their narratives indicate that for Elite interviewees, a discussion about college is often intertwined with a discussion about navigating Elite, its resources, and expectations tied to those resources.

> Keisha: Like math, I came to Bush [when it was united as one school] and I was making straight As [after a challenging middle school experience with the subject]. Except for this year, in Calculus. I did alright, but the teaching wasn't as beneficial as the other two teachers, so.
>
> Grace: That's for her math class. In [the middle school magnet], she took a harder class—Algebra II in seventh grade. 'Cause our teacher left. [Grace explained the disruption of her teachers departure, a midyear replacement, and the replacement teacher's ineffective pedagogical skills, though he knew his subject well]. He said, "I'm going to pass everyone except for some because it will look bad," but he could NOT teach (both girls snicker at the memory). Like some of the kids just knew the math already and they were making 90s, but other kids were—he didn't teach well, so, like even the other teacher/director—when it was Bush and Elite together, we [the Elite kids] has a director and he would come in an teach us. He was good in math and a good teacher—it seemed like they hired him 'cause they needed someone to hire and like, just—we needed a teacher. He even told her that we didn't have to go to college to do something with yourself. He talked about his gambler friend and poker friend (laughing through the story)—how was that supposed to help us? Just wasn't. Everyone was like, "Just pass us, just pass us" 'cause—
>
> Keisha: But our friends were really happy cause we were getting As for the first time—we don't care if we go on to the next class and fail, we are getting As for the first time in a long time.
>
> Grace: Some of our friends who were getting As with the other teacher, making 80s and stuff—
>
> Keisha: Like HOW? Rounding up those grades and stuff.

The girls discussed a biology class and how they made it through a poorly taught class.

> Keisha: I read the cover from front to back and did the work. Those who didn't failed. Do the work. That's all it was and if you couldn't—
>
> Grace: Get yourself a 70, that's all you could do. Kids were just good in biology and that's how they did it—
>
> Keisha: Read the covers from front to back, but those packets were really thick.
>
> Grace: I wouldn't say we have the best teachers.

I asked Keisha and Grace whether they discussed the matter with their parents or friends and, if so, to describe the nature of the discussion. Grace replied,

> I talk to my friends about it. They are pretty much on the same page. I haven't had all the teachers they [Bush students] have, so I can't relate on all levels. But our English teacher—we have stories. Adults? Our new principal . . . is trying to be supportive and

give me help on college. I wasn't sure of his role before he became principal, if it was what he signed up for. But now I feel he's ok

The girls laugh as I note that the Keisha has a look like she completely disagrees. Grace continued,

> I think that some of the teachers and stuff say stuff but don't live up to it. The principal is really busy. The counselor is busy. This was a really stressful year for the juniors—there was no adult to talk to. The counselors are always trying to do stuff and figure out grades—they are not real counselors. There is no peer mediation—not that I want to talk to those kids, anyways 'cause most of those kids pass your information around. Yeah, they are just trying to patch the program together [Elite] right now. Yeah, everything is busy, hopefully it will be better once they get on their feet [Elite] and then they can help people more.

I inquired as to whether the school environment was better before or after the split between Bush and Elite.

> Keisha: Before because there was more interaction. It wasn't that big a deal. We could take Bush classes, they could take Elite classes, interaction in the hallways, lunch together—now lunch is split. The track team was fine, everybody was fine. It's like, after the split, there's all this tension, and then the freshmen come and they already have the split. So they are sitting up under this little cocoon and the other ones are down there [in Bush] in their cocoon, and I don't know how it's going to be once we [seniors and those there before the split] leave. I feel like it's going to be two separate schools for real, and that will cause more problems, unless Elite moves out. And then I don't know what's going to happen then.
>
> Grace: Some of the teachers are better, some are more strict. I guess in the long run, they are better, but not with the kids interacting, not so much, but with the teachers—I think it's better mostly.

I asked Keisha and Grace about their peers' responses and what their friends' college aspirations appeared to be. Keisha replied,

> Some are not sure they can get in. All this work and if it doesn't pay off? Some of the kids in Bush are better off than us, 'cause they are in Top 10 [%]. We don't know what to say, but I hope you better go to college and you better do good. You can say you are in Top 10, but hope you pass. Hope you are ready. . . . 'Cause one of our friends she told me her cousin was Top 10 from Regents and went to [the Texas flagship university] and failed. He just dropped out. That's not good. I don't want to go to school and like, fail. So I just hope what we are doing is preparing us, even if we are not in the highest rank—that we are prepared.

Keisha and Grace describe why they remained in the Elite Magnet.

> Keisha: After all these years, it's too late to drop out and go to be valedictorian in Bush. I don't want to cheat myself.

Grace: Even though people say that, they still think that Elite makes [and means], "You are better, you are some of the smarter kids." That's what I think and that's what they say, Bush, or they wouldn't think stuff like, "You think you are smarter than us." They think that, too, everybody thinks that. That's what is really keeping us in, anyways, dropping down [to Bush] is better if you want to be higher in the class, but it's cheating yourself.

Keisha: It's better if you take more challenging classes like what Elite is providing for us. Supposed top of the line professors and got their degrees at top institutions, and we are supposed to have all these advantages. If it's there—it's free. Helping us getting ready for college and having Elite on your transcript is supposed to be a big deal and carries a lot of weight.

Keisha and Grace's description indicated that African American students were taking a gamble. On one end, they described Elite as requiring heavier preparation but having a stronger reputation. One the other end, enrolling in Bush meant aiming for a higher rank regarding in-state school placement in college. The narratives of the students of this study appeared to have indicated that Elite students aimed for the Ivy League schools while Bush students focused on local or state universities. All of the student narratives indicated that "free" money in the form of financial aid was important. Keisha and Grace both believed that their CAP assisted minority students with getting the support that they missed at Elite (see Section 1 of this chapter). Grace said,

> There is this sense of like, who is in Elite? And if you [a Black kid] gets a better grade, it's like, [loudly mimicking] "HOW DID *YOU* GET THIS?" There are some Asians, Whites, who ask this. It depends on background, too. Some kid think that because they live in a big house down south, in [a prestigious residential neighborhood], they think they are all that. Their mom pays for tutoring, big classes, they think they are smart, but their parents pay for all this stuff for them to make them realize opportunities. And they were taking SAT classes since they were like 2, maybe.

Keisha's statement described her perspective about the nature of academic and supplemental legacy. Her narrative demonstrated insight about whether such legacies meant one was smarter or a beneficiary of more familial based resources.

Keisha: So, I feel like they don't give us credit. We got into Elite 'cause we had to do everything you did, too, and we got into Elite. People forget that.

Grace: There's also like a social class to, like, rank in our school. The kids whose parents are professors . . . they think they are the highest, then there is the one who are kind of weird—different colors. Like what was said about the [teacher who commented on] "the jungle upstairs," like, "Whoa," walking around barefoot, crazy color hair. That's what she's talking about [referring to her sister's comment]. [The students' whose parents are] professors . . . have an advantage

cause they can teach them, edit their paper—they talk about it, "Oh my mom edited my paper," "Oh my dad flew from Japan and is coming in 2 weeks." It's like they are always bragging with each other. [Keisha agrees]. Yeah, sometimes I get really angry with those obnoxious little kids. But I know—I am doing fine in my classes. I am working hard, I don't really care what they say 'cause they'll be coming asking me for help and I get higher grades and they'll be looking at me! I got it sh--. (laughter).

Craig's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships, and Academic and Social Development

Craig's narrative on his school environment and peer relationships described varying levels of conflict and identity among peers, particularly Black peers, who were enrolled in Bush and Elite. Similar to the experiences of Keisha and Grace, Craig described his place as a Black student in the Elite Magnet. It appeared that he navigated his identity in terms of what it meant to be a Black male in the Elite Magnet Program. On one hand, the school's official split and its subsequent relocation separated him from his African American peers and caused tension surrounding his sense of belonging and validity among his African America Bush peers. Similar to Keisha and Grace's narratives, Craig also expressed similar racial tensions espoused from his White Elite peers and school adults about the place of Black students in Elite.

Me: Let's talk about your peers: friends, relatives, classmates, what are the responses of your peers to you?

Craig: Well, at school, since we have two schools, they try to be funny like, "Shouldn't you be upstairs by now?" 'Cause I gotta go upstairs. They, downstairs, are like, "Aw, you think you are smart". You know, the little stereotypes between both schools. I'm like, "It's nothing like that," 'cause I still claim both schools. I still keep it real with everybody. It's not just [that] I signal one—yeah, I go to one school, but I still talk to Bush, the kids downstairs and whatever. So some of my friends be joking, but they be for real, you know, like, come on it's not even cool. We're supposed to be tight. Just 'cause of a little split, it's not supposed to separate us. That just makes me mad.

Me: So, are you saying that most of your friends are in Bush?

Craig: Yeah.

A racial split became clear in the Bush and Elite school environments. I asked Craig about whether he perceived race to be an issue. I asked directly whether the Bush and Elite schools were divided by race.

Craig: Yeah, they call them, you know upstairs, the smart White kids. And then downstairs got just the Black kids and whatever. And I am kind of mad 'cause like, we need more [Black] males. And like two of our top males they went down my freshman year to Bush.

Me: Why do you think they did that?

Craig: I don't know if it was too much pressure. But one stereotype is that it is easier at Bush. Like there's not that much work. And I was mad 'cause in my class [in Elite] there were only two of us. When we first got there my freshman year, there were a good amount of Blacks in the magnet. We just had this dropout rate from the magnet back to the Bush school.

Even as a former Bush school administrator, I was surprised by Craig's comment about once having had a larger number of Blacks in Elite. Craig described an exodus of Black males from Elite back to the Bush school. I was concerned that a lack of in-school support contributed to this outflux of Black students.

Me: When the Black males are contemplating going to Bush, do the Elite teachers and counselors encourage them to stay in Elite?

Craig: Ah, I feel like it was more on them [the students] to do that. 'Cause to be honest they didn't have good reasons to tell me [why they wanted to leave Elite]. "I just want to be at Bush." They couldn't handle the work. You know, they couldn't be real with me, just tell me, "I wanna go to Bush." And so, looking from freshman year to junior—we have more men from the recent freshmen and sophomores that came in, but when we first started—them boys that got out [of the magnet] are the top at Bush. I think that is another main reason, 'cause it would be easier to be Top 10 [%] or whatever in Bush than it is to be in magnet.

Me: Do you think they are concerned with their grades?

Craig: Yes, very.

I expressed that it seemed like Craig had a lot of support. I wanted to know if he thought the other students who left had that same support.

Really, I don't know. To be honest, my freshman year in high school, I'm thinking about girls, football, the high school life. You know and so, I mean, that's when—I say no. 'Cause that when everything was all together and when it split, that's when, if you did not get a chance to know the person, the administration, then—'cause some people are not outgoing.

Craig's quote described his reflection on his own experiences as a freshman. He focused on what he saw as "the high school life," which appeared to emphasize his social development. His narrative indicated that getting to know the school's adults ("the administration") as a strategy that benefited him when the school split. Craig's comment that "some people are not outgoing" indicated a sense of self-agency that he placed on students in developing student–adult relationships for their academic development. Craig's description appeared to indicate that connected students would get the attention, and therefore support, of school adults. Conversely, shy or quiet students would not.

Me: Did you ever think about leaving the magnet?
Craig: Yes, but I have been in magnet since sixth grade and why stop now? It's why my mom wanted me to continue in high school, why give up now?

Craig offered this rhetorical question despite the appearance of an added pressure, competition and isolation experienced by African American students in Elite, especially since its split from Bush. He stated,

> And you know, I can make it. Even when my friends started leaving, I was like, I'll go talk to them downstairs during passing periods. 'Cause I am in classes with my other friends you know all day, every day. My sophomore year, I was like, "I'm a stay." My mom wouldn't let me leave [the magnet]. I don't think no one in my family would let me if I tried (laughter). Even if I talked to her, "*I don't know*" [indicating how he'd approach his mother], she'd be like, "Just deal with it." It's a lot of work, but it's gonna be really useful at the end. So I am glad I didn't get out. I'll find out that, I feel like, being in magnet has made me better as far as school wise cause it's made me, like, not more excelling but . . . it's more challenging, I guess.

Craig described the presence of high expectations. High support for all students was not as evident in his description, particularly in terms of African American students enrolled in the Elite.

Me: So you and the students in the Magnet recognize that it's more challenge.
Craig: Definitely more work, more to keep up with all day. More responsibility and everything. It's, like, stressful, 'cause we do get a lot of work but get it done. But at the end we feel satisfied with our results.
Me: Talk to me about the differences between Bush and Elite. What would you be missing if you went from Elite to Bush?
Craig: I'd be distracted 'cause I have so many friends. I have friends upstairs but more downstairs. "Ah what you doing?" [Mimicking what his Bush peers would say]. And one day, my best friend who goes to Bush showed me his work and I looked at it and was like, "Are you serious?" and he was like, "Yeah, this is it," and I was surprised 'cause, like, I ain't trying to say it was easy, but it was something he could do real quick. I was like, "Man, that's crazy."

I posed a hypothetical question to Craig:

Me: What do you think would happen if all of the school, Bush and Elite, looked like Elite as far as expectations and work?
Craig: If that was happening, I think a lot of the African Americans would probably not be able to handle it.
Me: Really?
Craig: Like, I don't know. This school year we had a talk. Like, some people are smart enough, it's just the mentality to work hard and do the work. 'Cause it's a lot of people capable of doing the work, some of them really can do it. But it's just,

"Naw, that's too much work" [mimicking what some of his Bush peers might say].

Me: Well, the Bush students have had the option of not doing the work.

Craig: Yeah and like some of them, I spoke to some of my friends got accepted to Elite but didn't go. I spoke to some of them, and they are like, "nah, I'm not going." And it kind of disappoints me 'cause of the stereotypes they have between both schools. That we split. Ah, "the White kids are upstairs, we got the troubled Black kids downstairs." You know it just brought tension between both schools. You know, people are like, '"Are you going to have a separate football team?" Oh what's not going to get separated, 'cause you know when you walk into school, you can already see that it's segregated enough already.

Me: How's that?

Craig: Cause, you walk in, you see all the Black kids downstairs. You won't see that many White kids downstairs, like maybe two. Then you are like, "Where are the White kids?" Where is the diversity at? Then you walk upstairs and you see nothing but White kids. You know a few Blacks here and there. It's like, "Wow." For some people who didn't know that the school was like, separated.

Me: Do the students recognize that?

Craig: Yeah. Some students had protests before it happened [the official split] 'cause they didn't want the school to be separated. And the motto is "separate schools, one family," but now it's like two schools, two separate families. That's how some students feel. But even like the administrators got childish. Thinking the split, it's like advantages and disadvantages, but it's a lot of tension.

Me: When you say "childish," what did you mean?

MC: Like, they, from what I heard, if you were on Elite, they had this thang and I heard that and Bush teacher responded, "Well they are not my kids," you know, "you should watch them." And it's like, wow, dang—that split is crazy.

Craig's description indicated that he recognized a gap between what was espoused (for example, the motto "two schools, one family") and his perception of the reality of the split between Elite and Bush ("now it's like two schools, two separate families"). His narrative continued to demonstrate a real racial divide in terms of school resources, expectations, and support. Craig described the students' response to the split, followed by his perspective of the school's differences and impact of the split on the school environment.

Me: About the students who protested, was it mainly Elite or Bush or did you have students from both camps?

Craig: Both camps, both, because you have your football people, you have these different clubs—now that we have different lunch times and different times for set-up time, and a lot of people can't make it.

Craig explained the confusion that occurred over the school's schedule and attempts to improve it over the year. He was a part of the campus advisory council and was among four

student representatives charged with reviewing the issues surrounding the Bush–Elite split. Craig observed, "Pros of the split: more club time. Cons: the tension between the schools, the teachers. Not many people liked the split. So you can definitely tell when you walk in the school, racial tension, you know, between the schools."

The Bush school participated in an advocacy period. Since it was hosted as part of Bush's First Program, Elite students would not have been assumed to have a personal connection to it. Craig, however was part of an advisory of young African American men headed by the Bush school's principal and a faculty researcher from the state flagship university. Craig described his involvement.

> I have two advisories. One with the Bush principal . . . and [a mentoring cohort for young African American and recently Latino men at Bush]. Ah, that's the one I always go to, but I go to my Elite advisory on TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills preparation] days. Besides that, I am always with [the principal], though.

Craig described how he utilized his advisory and advocacy periods:

> My overall advisory is time to catch up on work, go visit teachers if you need to make up work, sometimes we do activities in the advisories depending on the concept, like leadership building, ah, let's see, the community stuff—it depends on the different advisories. Like some days she would have "chill" days where you just catch up and do what you have to do for the next class. It's like a break. It gives you a break as well.

Craig described the advisory and advocacy period as being held for 30–45 minutes during the mornings after the second period of the day. They were held every Monday as a result of their blocked schedule.

> Me: Is there anything about your particular advisory that you like?
> Craig: Yeah, I love it, my advisories. My advisory we have like many people, and not only that, but we have our principal. And he has these . . . reports. And so he checks up on our grades and things. 'Cause we have expectations and standards to keep ourselves accountable in our advisory groups. So it's more than just, you know, chilling and getting free time. It's actually something worth meeting—to go to. And I think a lot of us look forward to going to every Monday and that be like our favorite thing. 'Cause we go on field trips together, go to [the university], we went to Samsung, we go to places and hear about how other African American people made it. So it's like, "Oh, ok, we can do the same," so it's definitely something to look forward to. And everybody knows each other in the club, it's fun, I just can't wait to go to it.

Craig described his advocacy group as an African American mentor-based support group. He described the advisory periods as times where some students were able to catch up with friends or school work.

> I think advisory is also a time for clubs as well. So, I mean some people might go to advisory then they go to club, so just having that 30–45 minutes to meet or finish up something, that's definitely, like good time right there. 'Cause I know a lot of kids, you know, I ain't even gonna lie. Sometimes, If I didn't finish work, it's hard to finish, I'm like, "Oh, snap, I didn't finish," and it just gives me that extra time to finish before third period, you know, to do what I got to do.

Simone's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships and Academic and Social Development

Simone, like the peers of this study, described individual agency as important in aspiring to college and in terms of academic development in high school. Also similar to her peers of this study, Simone viewed her African American Bush peers more critically than she did Elite students. In describing differences between Bush and Elite, Simone used the term "lazy."

> Me: Tell me what makes Elite and Bush so different?
> Simone: People that aren't lazy and put their foot forward to get the work done.
> Me: Lazy. I have heard that term before. Where do you get that from, what do you mean?
> Simone: Well, down at Bush—I mean downstairs, sorry. [Simone apologized as if sensing that using the term "down" for Bush was demeaning or problematic].[In Bush] they don't really expect a lot of us, they really don't.

Further in her narrative, Simone described examples of why she saw the Bush school's environment as lazy, particularly as it compared to the Elite Magnet.

> Especially with Elite—Well, I talk to Craig a lot [who attends Elite] and their due dates, their due dates are *due* dates. The assignments need to be turned in and there are no turning in assignments late. You have to be on your game. And downstairs, it's really not this way. I've noticed it mainly with the assignments, the classes. [In Bush] I am in pre-AP classes and it's the same thing as regular classes. Why should I be in pre-AP if we are doing the same thing, the same expectations are being held as in regular classes [in Bush]?

From her narratives, Simone apparently believed in academic rigor, set expectations, and integrity. Simone appeared to use these three particular tents to judge the quality of her school experiences. Simone's focus on these traits appeared to be the outcome of her mother's high expectations, which Simone's earlier narrative demonstrated in Section 1 of this chapter. Simone offered another example of her mother's high expectations in contrast to her school experiences when she was placed in a special-needs program during her middle school years.

> Me: You seem to be getting your cues from your mom. Is she preparing you for the things that you will have to do differently?
> Simone: Yeah, and I knew I had to work harder and I actually worked harder and I was like so nervous with pre-AP courses 'cause in middle school I didn't take pre-AP courses and I was in this program called 401? 405? It was basically a program,

not for like special ed, but of, slightly above special ed. You know, people who are dyslexic or something, they get in those courses. And they thought that I was dyslexic for a long time. And then they figured out that I wasn't dyslexic and I had, I was like, I was in that program. And so it was kind of hard to get out of the program. But I got out of the program in my eighth-grade year. I was nervous to be in pre-AP classes. 'Cause I was like in regular classes. This is another reason why expectations are important. When I was in the classes [referring to 504], and you could ask the teacher, "Hey can I get another week to do this?" and they'd give it to you like . . . "Well, go on ahead. You can get your extra week, or extra month or however long you really want to—however long it takes." I never really asked for that 'cause my mom would get mad. She's like "*What*?! You need an extra week to do *that*? No you don't!" And she always knew that I was way smarter than I put off. She always knew how smart I really was. She would get mad and say, "You don't need extra time. You're procrastinating!"

Me: So she wouldn't let you take on any excuses?

Simone: No. I would procrastinate a little bit (chuckle) because I knew I was in the program and could get that extra time if I wanted to. And then the program around expectations weren't high at all. There really aren't expectations, you just do whatever you want to do.

Me: Do you think other students recognized the low expectations in the program?

Simone: Yeah. I think they use that to their advantage, too (laughing), like I did—'til I got caught.

The type of support and expectations described by Simone provided similar insight on parental knowledge of children's intellect as offered by Shawn, later in his narrative. Simone's description of her mother's distinct understanding of the issue at hand was in direct contrast to that the school's perception. Whereas Simone was able to take advantage of her school's low expectations of her academic capacity, Simone's mother knew better and called her out.

As she described her transition into the Bush school, Simone described how her placement in the 504 program during her middle school years followed her into high school (the designation 504 is based on Section 504 of the civil rights law protecting civil rights of students with disabilities).

Simone: Yeah, I had to pass and it's probably because I was in the program I was in, and it showed up on my grades, besides my grades, and they were probably like, "Well, let me add an extra 10 points to her grade or something 'cause she is in this program."

Me: This is what you are figuring that these teachers in your ninth-grade class were thinking?

Simone: Yeah, this is what I am figuring. I can't be sure, but what I am figuring is that they probably added some points.

I told Simone that I found it interesting that she had thought the process through, that I perceived her insight as "pretty smart." She laughed and then described her transition from middle school to Bush High School:

> It was scary. And then I didn't have my two best friends with me that I had wanted. I didn't have them there and felt lost. 'Cause the people that I knew, I didn't really hang out with. Like I knew people at Bush, but I didn't hang out with them. They weren't the people that would comfort me when I needed it. But it's ok, I made it through.

Simone described the same need for peer support as she transitioned from middle to high school that Hope had shared during her narrative account. However, Simone attended Bush despite not having her "two best friends" with her. Hope had attended because of her friends' attendance. To Simone's comment that she "made it through," I asked how she had done so.

> Simone: (Whispers as if thinking aloud) I don't know. I really don't know. I think it was just me getting into the books. Focusing on school work instead of the social life. I really like went into school work. And now, I'm trying to focus on both but it's hard, though. It's hard to balance them, but I am really trying to. In ninth-grade year I really didn't have much of a social life. Just school work and theatre. Just school work and theatre and that's it.
>
> Me: And how do you feel now that you are incorporating some of that social life?
>
> Simone: I feel like it's too much! (Laughing). It's hard sometimes. To like, especially with Craig [Simone's boyfriend]. I'm like I know I want to hangout with him . . . but I know I need to get this school work done. Then in the end I end up hanging out with him (sheepish laugh). The school work gets done eventually. But I end up hanging out with him, meanwhile rushing all night trying to get the school work done, "Oh crap!"
>
> Me: Do you and Craig talk about each other's schooling experiences? For example, what it's like for him to be in Elite?
>
> Simone: Um, we did like a couple of times, but I am not sure I remember much of it (slightly apologetic laugh). 'Cause he's like the Top 10 %, he's his class president, and what not. So he goes to those big meetings they have up there. And they talk about whatever they talk about up there. Like moving, something with Elite. How they are getting rid of the Top 10 % up there. All kinds of stuff. He actually wanted me to go up there to Elite. And my mom, she actually considered me going up there and I considered it myself. And I'm scared, "I don't know if I want to go up there." And so. And then he told me not to.
>
> Me: Really?
>
> Simone: 'Cause they are changing stuff a lot up there.
>
> Me: In what ways?
>
> Simone: He said they were getting rid of Top 10 % upstairs [in Elite]. Then he was like there is no reason to be in Elite. If you getting rid of the Top 10 %. And I didn't know exactly what he was talking about. I didn't really know. I was too busy staring at him (we both laugh), to be honest. I'm gonna be honest with you (laughter between us).

Similar to what Keisha, Grace, and Craig described in their narratives, Simone reported that Black students who attended Bush and Elite appeared to enact decision-making strategies based on their enrollment in Bush or Elite. The notion of "dropping down" to Bush from the Elite Magnet and the references to Bush as "down" and Elite as "up" indicated deeper meaning. I discuss both phenomenon and their interaction further in chapter 5 of this study.

In her narrative of how she managed her transition, Simone discussed her difficulty with math and her strategies for surviving a math class that she doesn't understand:

> I write down the assignment, even though I don't know what's going on. And then I try to turn the assignment in late, so he [the teacher] doesn't see. I turn it in and walk out the door. I try the best I can.

I asked if Simone spoke to her teacher about her feelings about math.

> Simone: (Very quietly) no. (She laughs, clearly to play off the situation.)
> Me: Why not?
> Simone: I don't know, math teachers are weird (laughter). No I haven't talked to him yet. You are not the only one looking at me like that. My mom was like, "You need to go to his tutoring." I'm like, "I know I need to go to his tutoring. I just don't want to have to go to his tutoring." Talked to me about some dude upstairs . . . who can tutor me. I'm like, "I don't want to go upstairs for tutoring, I don't want to go to tutoring." I don't know, I just think, I don't know. Ms. N said our math department is not strong enough. I'm going towards what she said.
> Me: Not strong enough to teach it?
> Simone: Not strong enough to teach. Because my math teacher, Mr. V, he's real good at what he does. He does his geometry, pretty good. I just think that maybe he should be teaching college. He does it that good. And I don't feel that he has a lot of patience 'cause I see him work with the students in class, and there is one student, his name is Daniel, and he struggles in math just like I do, except he asks questions and I don't. He asked Mr. V to come help him and Mr. V was getting really frustrated with him because he wasn't getting the information. Since that day, I was like, "Uh uh. I won't be asking him *nothing*."
> Me: Because you saw how he responded to the other student, Daniel?
> Simone: Yes! I feel like maybe he should be teaching college rather than high school. I mean you have to remember, we still need help here! We need some help.

Simone's narrative spoke directly to the failure of schools in clearly articulating expectations and support regarding where the bar for achievement will be. Simone's experience provided an example of a student attempting to navigate the process of being educated on her own (for example, silence and faking her math assignment). Similarly, when students' own strategies fail, they may very well disengage from coursework and school.

Importantly, however, Simone's example indicated that students do not disengage before initiating some strategies of their own. I discuss this further in chapter five.

In terms of peers, Simone described herself in juxtaposition to some of the African American in her class at Bush. The description surfaced within a discussion of Simone's attempt to deflect a teacher's attention, Simone summarized her feelings:

> I don't know, when you are working and someone is just staring at the person, "What you want?" Why are you staring at me like you are weird? Go off and help somebody else. I know someone else need help. . . . I'm actually in like a pretty smart class, though. Even though it's a ghetto class, it's a smart class.

I asked Simone to explain what she meant by her describing her class as smart but ghetto. She explained,

> The really loud Black people. And I'm not [a] really loud Black. They are just really, disrespectful, I should say—more disrespectful. Like when I say disrespectful Black people, I am not saying, you know [all] Black people, I am just saying disrespectful Black people.

Simone clarified that by her categorization of her class, she referred to a subgroup that does not include all Black people, or even the majority. It was an interesting moment. From experience, I understood that some African Americans felt the need to explain this sentiment. They appeared to make this distinction more than Whites because Blacks tend to live in closer proximity of each other along class and capital lines that impacted their socialization. The poor Whites, who might correlate to those Simone called '"ghetto Blacks" are often not found in the public spheres around their more socialized White peers. Simone continued to offer another example of conflict at Bush:

> Yeah there's a large group, most [in Bush High School] are like that. Not all, but there is a whole lot of them. You see them through the halls. Walking through the halls and being disrespectful to everyone they can. Bumping people through the halls, bum rushing [pushing masses of people at once] people, got the football players, it makes me mad. People tall like Shawn, big and buff, running through the hallways pushing everyone they can. I want to sue!

I shared with Simone what the literature offered about Black youth attitudes and an oppositional culture. I asked for her perspective.

> Yeah, I know that because my sister is kind of like that. My momma is not here 'cause she will get mad if I say something about my sister! I don't know, I guess like some of it could be a part of the way you grew up. I know I didn't grow up that way, but I know some people who grew up in a household like that. And you do what you know. It's

> learned. If you learn it, it's hard to get away. And then there are some people like my sister, she does things because of peer pressure and it's kinds of sad. [Simone provided examples]. Sometimes my parents don't see it or act like they don't see it, which really makes me mad 'cause they saw everything I did at her age. So yeah, she does a whole bunch of stuff because of peer pressure. Because she did not act like that until she got to middle school. And really not in sixth grade. In seventh grade she started hanging around a group of girls that act this way and I know she doesn't act this way because I lived with her all my life, well most of it [since Simone is older], and she didn't used to act this way, and now she does. I know it's because of peer pressure. And I know when they say something at school happened and there was a fight, I know she was involved. Though she'll tell my mom and dad she wasn't, I know, I know. Um hm, I see it in her eyes.

Simone further described her sister and the change from their close relationship to its fragile state since her sister's drastic middle school transformation. Simone said that her sister viewed her as "a boring person" because she does not "hang out a lot" and because Simone is "laid back." Simone called it "wild stuff." She hopes her sister will grow out of the behavior and compared her sister to the situation of their father and his sister as an example of what not to do. Referring to her sister, Simone stated, "She has already shown that she can't do it [change] by herself. She's gonna need some help." Her narrative was similar to Shawn's description of the differences between himself and his brother, articulated in the first section of this chapter.

Simone did not appear to buy into the "it's just a phase" argument that adults around her gave. She expressed concern over the future and having the responsibility of having to deal with her sister if her parents were no longer around. I asked if Simone recognized her sharp insight. She replied that she was smart but not genius smart. I replied that her response was something I often heard in my conversations with her peers. The students appeared to categorize levels of intelligence. It was a reoccurring theme among the narratives. Simone said,

> I think, like, the ghetto crowd I was just mentioning? I think a lot of them are really smart actually. I think that if we really wanted to try we [Bush] could be Elite, we could be better than Elite. But we don't have the drive to do all that. We don't care enough to do any of that. We just think of Elite, well I think, thought—now I am kind of changing my mind—I thought Elite was better, but I feel if we really tried we could pretty much be Elite, if we wanted to. *We* could be a full school again. But they think Elite is better and leave it at that. And they just move on with their lives. . . . I feel disturbed. I want a change. I want to have everyone's smart level accepted, no matter how smart or how dumb.

Simone based her beliefs on the things she heard. She discussed friendship bonds, the ability to socialize with friends across Bush and Elite, and the break that occurred with the

school and program split. Simone said it was hard to spend time with her Elite friends. The limited options for doing so were before school, during lunch (often student reprieve), or after school. Simone confirmed racial issues between Bush and Elite.

> I am on the [campus advisory council] meeting, we talk about it, what the students say, and the differences between the two. We had outside people come in to talk with the principal, 'cause you know that's the only way to get him. They came in unexpectedly and talked about Bush and Elite, and they had people from Elite and Bush in the group, and they were speaking out about how they felt. And Elite came down and was like, "Well, you know what? It's wrong that when you see a Bush person, or a Black person upstairs, you think, 'oh they must be in Bush.'" Especially last year, there was a lot of controversy because a Black person is upstairs, they may be in Elite but the security guard will say, "Hey. you need to be downstairs" because they are Black. They really don't do much to the White kids downstairs. They really can't do much to the White kids downstairs 'cause downstairs we have the cafeteria, the office, and stuff. They may be doing other things. The kids said to the principal, "The Bush kids may be upstairs because they are going to the library and you are telling them to go downstairs because they are Black." And it might be an Elite student upstairs but you are telling him to go but he may be a Elite student.

While Simone was not sure when first questioned, she reflected more on her feelings about the Bush–Elite split.

> I think it's bad because a whole bunch of White people upstairs. That's one of the reasons the Bush students think Elite is full of White, rich, preppy kids and supposedly Elite thinks downstairs is filled with a bunch of ghetto students. But I have talked with Elite students, the ones I talked to—I'm sure there are some upstairs who are like, "I don't want to mess with some Black kids." I have talked to Elite students who weren't rich and preppy and had no problem standing right besides me and having a good old conversation. . . . I like people like Craig, 'cause they say if you go upstairs, you turn. [She gives examples of what Craig does]. He is still being him, and you know what? Everybody loves him in Bush and everyone loves him in Elite.

Simone thought that the notion of being proper and articulate as White was an excuse. She discussed the differences between her sister and herself and said that Blacks who are not like her do not hang with her for their own reason. Simone stated that calling someone who is Black "White"—Simone called this acting "perfect"—because he or she excels was as silly as calling someone Black because they acted up. Simone's perspective offered a refreshing option to the long-standing oppositional behavior theories on Black student achievement.

Shawn's Perspectives on School, Peer Relationships, and Academic and Social Development

Similar to Simone, Shawn viewed differences in his peer's attitudes as stemming from how they were raised and their personal choices. In the first section of this chapter, Shawn

referred to these factors as "morals." Like the peer of this project, Shawn described the presence of a racialized split between Bush and Elite.

> There is definitely a split. Downstairs [where Bush is housed] is sort of its own class. The Elite, I guess people say Elite is filled with Bill Gates and all the people that's gonna be building stuff and all the people that can do Rubik's Cubes in 5 minutes.

The Rubik's Cube served as a symbol for intellect and creative promise in Shawn's narrative.

> And all that other stuff and downstairs, it's like we are all the, the I guess—I'm not going to say the cool people, I'm just going to say all of the people that are socially *inclined*, there we go.

I asked Shawn to further describe and compare his perspective of those downstairs in Bush and those upstairs in Elite.

> Shawn: Upstairs it's, honestly to me, upstairs—I think the Elite kids are more comfortable about what they wear and how they look than the downstairs people, the regular. The people in Elite don't care about their looks, don't care if anyone else cares about their looks. They come to school comfortable with how they want to look, they are matching—they don't care if other people don't think they are matching. They sit there and do their work, Calculus and Algebra III, and that stuff. But downstairs, it's a *whole other story*, other total ball game. Downstairs, the biggest thing is having the *freshest* [best] shoes, and the biggest chain [necklace], and the iciest chain and the livest [coolest] hat, and it's the jeans and the jackets and all the females and all the guys—*it's on*—it's just *crazy*. I guess downstairs, they are more materialistic than upstairs.
>
> Me: Why is that?
>
> Shawn: 'Cause honestly, at lunch, at Bush lunch about, about three fourths of everyone at Bush lunch has a cell phone. But you go to Elite lunch, not everyone has a cell phone. But the ones who do, not everything is up to date, they don't have iPhones [at this point, I am hesitant to show my own iPhone, provided as a gift], they don't have the latest 3G. They got a phone that works how they want it to work. They have a phone to call, receive, text message if they want it to, take a picture if they want it to—that's basically it. That's all they need it for. Downstairs, you might not ever use your camera, or may not ever get on the Web, but just the fact that you pulled out an iPhone gives you credit downstairs. You can walk up to school in the raggiest clothes, but the minute you pull out an iPhone or pull out the chain from under your shirt, like "What?" And it seems like a magnet just attracts a couple of females and that's going to be his thing to make him want to upgrade some more.

Shawn's narratives described the influence and presence of status brokers, symbolic brokers of privilege and power among the students at Bush. I probed more about the differences

between Elite and Bush and asked if the differences could be explained in terms of social versus academic inclination.

> I am not going to say more academically inclined, I guess the people upstairs were raised more like I was. A sense of "you're smart" to know it and use your full potential to do what you need to do. That's how everyone upstairs is from my perspective and what I get from other people. The people downstairs, yes there are some smart apples downstairs! I know some people that can do Rubik's Cubes in like 2, 3 minutes! I know some smart kids that's in Bush but, like at the same time, downstairs in Bush everything is social. Everybody talks about everything and everybody. Looks [appearances], like, it's a plus and basically, the in crowd. Upstairs, no one cares about an in crowd. Yeah people have friends, yeah there are people who think they are better than other people, but like upstairs everybody knows they are smart.

Shawn's narrative described the cultures of the schools. I asked whether he thought the different school cultures might have resulted from being recruited and maintained as elite for the magnet.

> Shawn: They [Elite] have what they need to push to their full potential or consequences *will* occur. But like downstairs, they know they are smart, but they don't care about the consequences, they feel like, oh, their parents are going to do nothing. Grounding ain't nothing. They take away a phone, ain't nothing—they got a house phone. That's what, I think.
>
> Me: What do Elite students think of Bush students and vice versa?
>
> Shawn: (Sighing). I can tell you right now, Bush students think everyone in Elite is a geek.
>
> Me: And that's a bad thing?
>
> Shawn: No, to me it's not a bad thing, but most people whenever they see a dork, or loser, or kiss up or something, it's like . . . it's bad to ask a whole bunch of questions or be smart or something like that. But upstairs, honestly, I really can't tell you what I think they talk about upstairs, all I know is I think everyone upstairs has their chin up and chest out and look at Bush people like, "Yeah I know I am smarter than you." They walk around with their chest poked out like, "Yeah I see you, but I am better than you, though." They walk around with this little "cluck-a-cluck" [mimicking a rosters' crow, indicating pride like a peacock] and stuff. The couple of times I went to Elite everybody was looking at me like, "Are you supposed to be up here?" or looking at me like I shouldn't be up here or something. Yeah it's on 'cause I got some Elite friends. They saw me and was like, "Hey Shawn!" or "Hey what's up?!" and give me dap [hand pound, a greeting originating from African American culture but adopted by youth culture generally] or something. And it's kinda—upstairs is kinda like, they poke their chest out 'cause they think, some of them think that we are dumber than them.

Shawn described his perception of how people upstairs were able to determine if a student was not a member of the Elite Magnet, or "from upstairs."

Shawn: I guess by the way you dress 'cause the only person that dresses, you know, like kind of like downstairs is Craig. That's the only person that I know [upstairs] that dresses with the new jeans, best kicks [shoes], so that's the one person that I know that does that.

Me: Really?

Shawn: Yeah. I mean ,cause I guess, upstairs parents don't really care about you having the latest shoes or the jeans or something ,cause they know that you are either going to tear them up, get them dirty, or something like that, and there goes a pair of $100 jeans. But downstairs, either parents do it or they do it themselves, but somehow they are getting the money to have the freshest kicks when they come out, the new Js, the new phones, just because they feel they gotta keep a certain reputation with people.

Shawn then described trust as a major issue for Bush students.

Shawn: Most people have to see it in writing, verbatim. 'Cause nowadays, a lot of people I guess don't really believe in the trust thing. That's a big issue, "can you trust" this thing? I mean, I know people that don't even trust you with their number. I know people with their real name either. That's the big issue. . . . A lot of people tend to lie so much you don't believe.

Me: Do you think students feel lied to?

Shawn: At home or at school. One of the two. Somewhere someone is lying to them. They believe it and end up getting let down so they are like, "Aww, I ain't gonna believe that no more," and they start trying to man up about everything.

Similar to his peers who participated in this study, Shawn imparted the importance of self-agency. Like Faith, Shawn demonstrated a strong belief in agency and indicated that he had strong support and encouragement that seemed to buffer the negative experiences that he and Faith discussed in terms of attending Bush High School.

At the time of these interviews, Shawn had not applied to all of his prospective colleges yet. Shawn stated that he had the personal numbers to the coaches at schools of interest to him and felt confident about making his aspirations for college a reality. His step-by-step plan was not very clear to me from our conversations and indicated a possible (but not definite) gap between his college aspirations and college access. Like some of his peers, Shawn was interested in loan-free assistance and applied for tennis scholarships at his top-choice schools. Shawn described Howard University, a HBCU, as his first pick because of the "important Black people" who went there. He viewed Howard as "a good place for Black people" and "still sort of Ivy League." He did not name the Texas flagship institution because of location rather than the school itself. Shawn anticipated attending college in the fall. He did not want to take a year off,

as he was concerned that doing so might prove a distraction or could temper his enthusiasm. Shawn stated that he wanted to "go right into it."

Section 2 Summary: Students' Narratives Regarding Their Experiences With School and Peer Relationships and the Impact on Academic and Social Development

Similar to the findings in the Section 1 summary of this chapter, the student narratives demonstrated an ongoing theme surrounding the role of cumulative and comprehensive systems of support as it related to their school environment and academic and social development. The narratives of this section demonstrated a more pronounced gap between their school's expectations and support for achieving said expectations. The students described utilizing strategies that appeared to help in their attempts at navigating a stratified system. Academic strategies appeared to be largely self-directed for Hope and Simone, and to a lesser degree for Keisha and Grace. Shawn, Faith, and Craig appeared to utilize their outside supports like the CAP and their family ties to move them toward their aspirations for college. Regarding their social development, the student narratives demonstrated that issues of race, identity, and peer group were regular, often interrelated concerns. Their narratives described the role of their school in exacerbating such issues in terms of support, expectations, curricular design, and pedagogical practices related to academic rigor.

Chapter Summary

The findings described in this chapter demonstrated that issues of identity, communication, expectations, and support played significant roles for the youth of this study. The findings also demonstrated that these issues played out in the students' school environments. I began this chapter by describing the students who participated in this project. I then provided narrative descriptive findings of their perspectives on the development of their aspirations for college, their familial expectations, and program intervention in terms of developing their capacity for accessing college. The first section described findings that addressed Research Question 1: In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity building systems (supports and interventions) for college? The second section described these students' experiences with school and peer relationships and the impact on their academic and social development, corresponding to Research Question 2: How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college? A brief discussion of the consistencies and inconsistencies of the student narratives was presented following each section.

Next, I present discussion and interpretation of the findings in relation to the literature, implications of the findings, and concluding thoughts in chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Interpretation, Implications, and Conclusions: Themes of Trust, Care and Racial Identity

Introduction

The focus of this dissertation was to explore the perspectives of African American youth's aspirations for college, their capacity-building systems (support and intervention), and their academic and social development towards college. The narratives of 7 student participants provided insight concerning their supports and school circumstances and how they navigated the path towards higher education. This exploratory study was guided by two primary research questions:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems (supports and interventions) for college?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of students aspiring towards college?

In this chapter, I introduce an interpretive discussion of the findings presented in chapter 4. CRT informed my interpretation of the findings. Results implied that capacity building via the school environment was impacted by varying levels of care, trust, and racial identity communicated by the school and internalized by the African American students. *School* refers to the environment, curriculum, and pedagogical practices associated with teachers, counselors, administrators, and staff. Thus, references to school also refer to *school adults*. I use the terms *school adults* to indicate a difference between adults in the home and out-of school lives of students and those adults with whom they interacted in school. This interpretive discussion also examines the implications of the adult–student interaction for the students' academic and social development affecting their college aspirations.

I begin this chapter by revisiting the meaning and use of interpretation as an approach for organizing data and as a sense-making process of research participants. I then interpret a process of communication and internalization as well as of differential treatment of students in schools as manipulative school processes, identified from the narrative descriptions in chapter 4. Next, I discuss trust, care, and racial identity as the three major themes in this dissertation and how these themes influenced the experiences of the student participants. For the theme of trust, I describe the influence of trust and communication, mistrust, miscommunication, and silence for students

in areas like decision making. For the theme of care, I describe its value as a facilitator of intrinsic aspirations or intangible resources useful for developing capacity (e.g., esteem, support, agency). I also discuss cultural perceptions, through the identification of ethnic terms that describe the relationship between care and achievement, particularly for Mexican Americans (Valenzuela, 1999) and African Americans. For the theme of racial identity, I discuss its influence on the students' identity development in terms of in-school peer relations, student coping strategies, and their interpreted effect on the school environment between the Bush High School and the Elite Magnet Program. Next, I interpret findings on communication and resources and how capacity building occurred for the students in their supplemental programs (like the CAP) compared to their school experiences with communication and resources. Then I discuss implications and policy considerations using a CRT response to racialized identities in school and the achievement gap. In this section, I also discuss the role of aspirations as an intrinsic resource for developing students' personal capital and, by extension, their access to college.

In the last sections of this final chapter, I discuss implications for the capacity-building systems transmission of intangible resources and capital through support and intervention, as well as this dissertation's contributions to the field. Following my concluding statement and suggestions for future studies, I reflect on my position as author. Having laid out the order of this chapter, I begin the discussion of the interpretations of the findings, starting with a recap of what interpretation means and how it has been used.

Interpretation

The Meaning and Use of Interpretation, Revisited

The title of this dissertation is *Exploring Counternarratives: African American Student Perspectives on Aspirations and College Access Through a Critical Process of Narrative Inquiry.* By "critical process" I refer to the use of description and interpretation to organize and make sense of my data (Wolcott, 1994).

Similar to what Madison (2005), Moen (2006), Moss (2004), and Andrews et al. (2008) said about narrative inquiry, interpretation is a reciprocal process that involves not only the interpretations of the researcher about the data, but also the ways that participants view, experience, and articulate their stories—the narratives that they share. Consequently, I describe how I, the researcher, interpreted the narrative findings. I begin with what I identified as the process of communication and internalization in schools among adults, the school, and students.

Communication and Internalization

In this dissertation, the process of communication and internalization between students and adults, especially with school adults, influenced how students navigated their school environment. Their narratives offered that they experienced differentiated treatment in school and that they perceived these differences in treatment as having been influenced by race.

The process of communication and internalization among students, schools, and student decision making was significant for the students involved in this study because they made choices based on what they perceived schools and school adults to communicate to them. In particular, their narratives indicated that the students perceived schools to signal who was being prepared for college by access to college-ready or college-preparing curricula. How and to whom a college-preparing curriculum was made available were interpreted by students as signs of the school staff's interest or disinterest in helping them access college. Their narratives indicated the perception of care espoused by schools, influenced whether students trusted their school and school staff's ability or willingness to prepare them for college or not. Where the presence of authentic, caring adults was strong, students of the study were encouraged to pursue their college aspirations. Where the presence of caring, authentic school adults was perceived by the students as weak, the students found themselves navigating the low expectations and low support of uninvolved school adults. In the absence of care, students made decisions about how to get what they needed in order to progress through high school using constructed strategies.

Figure 5.1 illustrates my interpretation of a process of communication and internalization in schools. Figure 5.1 demonstrates how students appeared to make sense of their school's communicated expectations and support. The narratives made apparent that students took away messages from the school about their perceived ability and its relationship to the school's willingness to prepare them for college. These messages about college readiness appeared to be coupled with a relationship that involved the school's curriculum; espoused expectations about achievement; and any willingness to support student achievement, as communicated by schools and school adults to students. Whether intentional or not, these messages invoked issues of trust and return of effort for students. Poor school support convinced the students that their efforts to achieve might go unacknowledged and therefore unsupported. Figure 5.1 shows the outcome that the process of communication and internalization had on students' decision making and their coping strategies for dealing with poor school support.

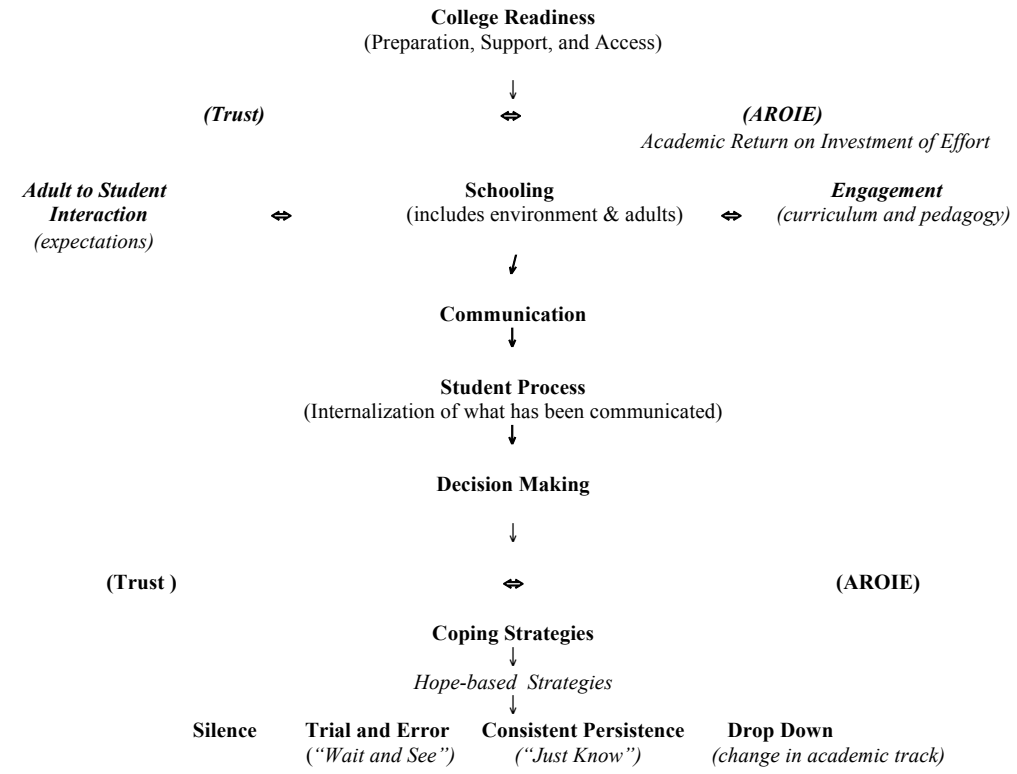

Figure 5.1. Process of communication and internalization among students, schools, and decision making.

At the top of Figure 5.1, *college readiness* refers to the college-going culture in the school's environment. College-going school cultures actively engage college preparation through curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction; support through teacher and counselor mentoring and instruction; and access demonstrated by students' applications and admission to the colleges that they applied to (Lumina Foundation, 2009a, 2009b).

In Figure 5.1, just below college readiness, *schooling* refers to the school environment and adult attitudes towards creating a college-going culture at Bush High School and the Elite Magnet. The narrative findings of this study revealed that the school environment regarding expectations and college readiness was emphasized differently for African American students, depending on whether they were enrolled in the Bush High School or the Elite Magnet Program. The differences resulted in varied paths towards academic and social development between the two school programs. Consequently, these varied paths also differentiated access to curricula and college resources for some students. Within Bush and Elite, African American students faced

schooling environments that were greatly influenced by the issue of trust concerning adult–student interactions. Findings indicated that the students in this study expected their school to promote their college readiness by building communities of trust, high expectations, and an engaging curriculum, coupled with high levels of assistance, which the students referred to as "help" (Ferguson, 1991a, 1991b, 1998, 2008).

Throughout the process, trust, which affected students' decision-making, was mentally weighed by students. As mentioned, varying levels of perceived trust resulted in different levels of academic effort by students. These varying levels of academic effort by some of the students did not appear to result from an oppositional stance (on which some literature on low performance has focused) but as a way of *conserving outputs*. Some of students appeared to see their, unacknowledged, unsupported efforts as a waste. They therefore utilized constructed strategies that might provide for them the best return on their academic effort. Under this light, academic effort was seen as an investment in student's education.

Next in Figure 5.1, *communication* refers to the process of interaction between school adults (teachers, counselors, administrators, staff) and students. The students who participated in this study offered that they expected their school to prepare them to access college. Their narratives indicated that they believed college readiness to be the responsibility of their schools. However, the students expressed that the college-readiness culture was not available for all students, but that their school environment was dichotomous, varying along racial lines. The African American students demonstrated that they judged the sincerity of their school adults and internalized what they viewed the school adults to communicate to them in terms of their worth and ability. I interpreted the experience that they described as an outcome of trust and communication and as the internalization of what students perceived to be communicated to them.

Figure 5.1 refers to this communicated internalization as *student process*. Influenced by trust, and by how and what the students internalized about the academic preparation and social development that they were or were not receiving in school, students then engaged in decision making about which coping strategies they would use to navigate their school environment's undermining culture. At each point in the process, trust and the students' perception of the type of return that they would get for their efforts influenced the level and type of input that they gave. I defined and labeled this factor, *academic return on investments of efforts* (AROIE).

When they perceived teacher or counselor belief and support to be low or to fall short of their expectations, the students articulated decision-making behavior that was interpreted as their engagement in at least one of the four coping strategies identified as part of the process of communication and internalization, illustrated in Figure 5.1. The strategies included: "silence," "trial and error," "consistent persistence," and a "drop-down" strategy in response to their academic tracks. As described earlier in chapter 4, silence refers to the withdrawal of active student engagement, particularly in the classroom. Students who appeared to employ the trial-and-error coping strategy seemed to utilize a wait-and-see approach. Others appeared to believe that they "just knew" that their actions would pay off, exhibiting a consistent persistence in their efforts to navigate their school experiences (see chapter 4 narratives). When the first three of these strategies did not appear to provide intended results, some students faced making a decision about whether to remain at their current class level (track) or to drop down to a lower academic track. With the exception of the drop-down coping strategy, the constructed strategies did not appear to have a strong consistency in terms of the order of their use. The drop-down method appeared to be a last resort, especially among African American students in the Elite Magnet Program, who seemed to have more invested in terms of years spent in the program, their familial expectations that they remain in the magnet program, and their own personal expectations.

In terms of the development of a nurturing, capacity-building, college-ready school environment, the student narratives indicated the importance of connecting adult to student communication in terms of expectations and support. The narratives demonstrated an awareness of racially differentiated curricula and pedagogical practices as a part of the school culture. In turn, the racialized culture resulted in African American students' receiving lower expectations and less support. The students perceived and internalized these varied school practices as complicating a college-readiness culture in school. They appeared to view such school practices as detrimental to their academic and social development as college-aspiring students.

Constructed coping strategies illustrated in Figure 5.1 demonstrated that one of the first questions the students involved in this study appear to ask themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, was whether they could really trust the school and school adults. For most of the students, their perception of whether the school was equally dedicated to all students' academic growth, and college readiness played a key role in how they answered this question. The

students' narratives demonstrated that they recognized the school's potential role in developing their academic and social capacity, thus building upon their college aspirations. However, the participants repeatedly cited their school's divergent stance on college readiness for them and their racial peers as proof of inequitable educational practices. This proof, for them, served to undermine their trust in the school personnel and programming. Lack of trust sometimes translated into less student engagement due to the students' perception of minimal returns on their academic investment (e.g., Hope and Simone's narratives). Moreover, several of the participants (Keisha, Grace, Simone, and Craig) attributed not only their own, but also faculty's low curricular and pedagogical engagement as an indicator of the school and school adults' low level of belief in them.

Student narratives indicated that the students acted (or reacted) according to their perceptions of school support and expectations. They seemed to internalize *what schools communicated and how they communicated.* The college-aspiring students who participated in this study constantly weighed the messages communicated to them about their ability; their value; and the willingness of their school to prepare, develop, and support their college aspirations. They recognized the presence of racialized patterns of access to resources and curricular disparities both between and within Bush High School and the Elite Magnet. For the students, the disparities were understood as representative of the value that the school placed on their ability and how or whether they should be supported and nurtured in terms of college readiness.

In response to such school-based disparities, the students involved in this study weighed and made decisions about the potential benefit before investing varied levels of effort into their school and academic work. I describe this approach as their AROIE. As the students balanced the reciprocal process of weighing trust and AROIE, the narrative findings revealed that they made decisions about which strategies to employ in order to address the disparities that they faced in school. These strategies included silence, hope strategies such as trial and error and consistent persistence ("just know"), and a drop-down method where students opted to leave their current academic plan for a comparatively easier plan. It appeared that these processes occurred in a systematic order where the drop-down method was the last coping strategy for Black students who struggled during their attendance at the Elite Magnet high school program. Recalling the narratives of Craig, Keisha and Grace, the students weighed the amount of effort

that they already put into their participation in the magnet program prior to making a decision to leave or to stay. A major precursor to the use of this strategy was determined by the possibility of protecting one's academic rank (for example, securing valedictorian status in Bush). In Bush, students dropped down from AP to pre-AP, to regular academic tracks. Academic rigor at each of these levels decreased from that of the curricular rigor and expectation of the previous academic track.

The process of communication and internalization described above related to this dissertation's three central tenets concerning aspirations and school and is illustrated later, during my discussion of how school practices manipulate college aspirations. The next section on differential treatment of students revisits the literature's understanding of these unequal practices. I then present a discussion of the influence of manipulative school processes on students' college aspirations and capacity building.

Differential treatment of students. Wiggan (2007) theorized that unequal treatment of students in schools along racial lines accounted for the gap in achievement among African American students. Similarly, Oakes's (1985) concept of tracking positioned the system of differentiated curriculum and pedagogy as a well-intended but shortsighted educational strategy. She offered that curricular problems could be traced to an entrenched cultural dynamic that hindered educational progress for all students. Findings from the narrative descriptions in chapter 4 of this dissertation indicated an intentionally divergent school environment. That is, students reported the presence of an intentional (not accidental, as Oakes suggested) dichotomous school environment, which was not the result of unintentional consequences or due to a series of unrelated factors that happened to come together. Rather, the narratives provided qualitative and critical examples that the school programs investigated as a part of this dissertation intentionally (though perhaps not maliciously) fostered dichotomous school climates that did not support college access for many of the students in this study. Even with access to the Elite Magnet, African American students perceived their school to provide inadequate in-school supports. Changes in the school structure impacted counselor support for some of the Elite students involved in this study (Keisha and Grace) and by extension, according to their narratives, their racial peers. The students involved in this dissertation perceived their schools to care less about them than their White and Asian peers and often cited their nonschool intervention programs such as the CAP as useful in filling the void. Yet, both Bush and Elite students who participated

in this dissertation demonstrated expectations that their school bear primary responsibility for their academic preparation, social development, and access to college.

Similarly, Wiggan (2007) cited Schmoker's argument that despite attention surrounding "accountability and high stakes testing, the means necessary to create school improvements in student achievement continues to be neglected" (p. 322). He supported Schmoker's call for equality in student treatment and Sizer's recognition that educational research must address the relationship between the "means and ends" of minority student achievement (Wiggan, 2007, p. 322).

The narrative findings articulated a clear difference in school and school adult expectations, curriculum, and support experienced between White and African American students. African American students in both Bush and Elite Magnet noted this racial variation. The student narratives indicated that the dichotomous school experiences coincided with their perception of the presence or absence of a college-ready school environment for African Americans in both schools. Differential treatment is exacerbated by a school's manipulative practices in two ways, by impacting students college aspirations and by affecting their capacity in relation to the transmission of capital assets. I describe the two processes next.

Manipulative school processes on college aspirations and support. The process of communication and internalization described previously related to this dissertation's three central tenets concerning aspirations and school: (a) Aspirations exist to some degree in all students; (b) aspirations can be increased, neutralized, or decreased; and (c) aspirations are manipulated by schooling practices. Figure 5.2 illustrates the relationship between aspirations and schools. School practices can manipulate the support of aspirations for college. The illustration is followed by a discussion of the ways in which school practices manipulate students' college aspirations and support.

A primary way that U.S. school environments manipulate and influence students' college aspirations is through curricular and pedagogical practices. These practices directly deny "college bound knowledges" to students of color (Yosso, 2002, p. 93). The narratives included in this dissertation demonstrated that manipulative processes of curricular knowledge exclusion occurred through school–adult attitudes, dichotomized courses (e.g., tracking) (Boger & Orfield, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes, 1985, 1986; Valenzuela, 1999, Yosso, 2002), and separate schools within schools, such as the Elite Magnet Program. While all of the students involved in

this study were college aspiring, they perceived differentiated school support as problematizing their access to college.

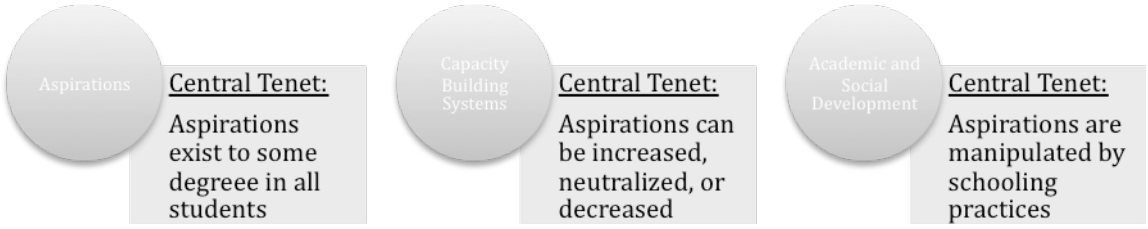

Figure 5.2. Central tenets on college aspirations: Relationship among variables.

Tracking, the process of sorting students in school-based factors such as academic ability (or perceived inability), often results in the classification of students, labeling them in ways that have profound effects on their treatment in schools groups (Oakes, 1985). Oakes (1985) found that tracking affected how teachers viewed and treated their students and meant that students were "treated by and experience schools differently" (p. 3). Similarly, the student narratives in this dissertation indicated that they experienced schools differently. They cited instances that denoted curricular and pedagogical practices the students perceived as being different from those of their White and Asian peers. Their narratives indicated that such differences were attributed along racial lines and that these lines affected resource, support, and academic development in school.

Academic tracking through different curricular practices between Bush High School and the Elite Magnet was the major form of tracking at this specific school site. The designation of Elite as a magnet school, where a differentiated academic curriculum is often approved by school districts, actually might serve as a buffer to closer inspections of how this difference in resources and support affects African American student achievement. Inherent in the process of tracking are the attitudes and expectations of school adults like teachers and counselors. As described in chapter 2 of this dissertation, the literature on the achievement gap posits low teacher expectations of African American students as problematic (Delpit, 1996; Ferguson, 1991a, 1991b; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Rist, 2000). Whether perceptions of African American students as deficient, incapable, or resistant, these attitudes influence where students are placed and how they are treated within such placements. As discussed in chapter 2, counselors' opinions about

which students should be in the college-preparatory track or about which students should apply to college are gate-keeping strategies that block opportunities and exacerbate an already fragile state concerning the African American college-access pipeline and prevalent racial achievement gaps (Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

While many schools deny using tracking practices, Oakes (1985) found that they indeed exist and are entrenched in U.S. educational culture, having "hellish consequences for young people in schools" (p. 5). Tracking negatively impacts student experiences and school-based outcomes. Similarly, the narratives of all 7 student participants of this dissertation, especially Keisha, Grace, Shawn, and Craig, demonstrated that the negative effects of tracking and the assumptions made by adults as a result of the tracking process interrupted the capacity-building system of their school environment. Their narratives demonstrated that the inequitable, racialized overtone inherent in the Elite Magnet and Bush nonmagnet high school programs and their curricular and pedagogical practices contributed to the contrasting environments of the two schools, despite being located at the same site. Bush High School was characterized as having a predominately African American and Hispanic student population and was consistently described in the student narratives as undersupported and therefore underachieving. The narrative descriptions of Bush stood in stark contrast to those of the Elite Magnet, which was described as having a predominately White and Asian student population. The Elite Magnet was described as high achieving and as having had access to a multitude of additional academic supports. The narratives indicated that access to these supports were perceived by the students as related to the racialization of their in-school identities. The impact of these differing environments is discussed later in terms of care, trust, and racial identity as three major themes of this dissertation.

Regarding policy, Wiggan's (2007) work on the differential treatment of students ascribed policy and institutional structures as promoting problematic schooling outcomes for African American youth. Wiggan (2007) cited an increased emphasis on standardized achievement measures and inequalities in Black–White education that "perpetuate racialized aspects of poor school performance" (p. 322). Furthermore, Wiggan (2007) noted a gap between academic expectations and achievement. His findings were consistent with the perspectives offered through the narratives of the dissertation participants. Wiggan (2007) observed, "It is evident that all students do not receive the same treatment with regard to their education, but

they are all expected, nevertheless, to produce similar outcomes" (p. 322). In line with the narratives of this dissertation, the literature makes clear that school practices can be traced to the creation and perpetuation of unequal, inequitable pathways for different groups of students. These manipulative practices influence capacity building and capital asset transmission. I discuss the process next.

The effect of manipulative school processes on capacity building and capital asset transmission for African American students. While the forms of capital are widely discussed in the social sciences as a tool for understanding the relationships between people and power (broadly defined), I do not center of capital per se in this dissertation. However, there is a relationship between capacity building and capital asset transmission. The relationship between capacity building and capital asset transmission influenced my conceptual thinking on the relationship between student's intrinsic drives (identified in this study as aspirations), their supports and interventions as capacity-building systems, and the impact of these systems on African American student's college access. As a result I start this point of the discussion with a review of the various forms of capital relevant to this study and the impact of the school processes on capital transmission. A discussion of this relationship is described using a CRT lens.

How has capital been understood? Bourdieu (1986) defined capital as

> accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated," embodied form) which when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. (p. 242)

Capital permeates both physical and conceptual forms, or what Bourdieu (1986) referred to as *incorporated* or *embodied* states. Capital, which requires time to accumulate and possesses the capacity to reproduce itself in "identical" or "expanded" form, "persists in its being" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242). Bourdieu understood capital to be transformational in its capacity, identifying two of its forms as *cultural capital* and *social capital*. Cultural capital refers to the generational transmission of knowledge pertaining to "the norms, styles, conventions and tastes that pervade certain social settings and allow individuals to navigate them in ways that increase their odds of success" (Massey et al., 2003, p. 6). The theory was originated in Weber's work (Massey et al., 2003). In whichever form, be it in an *embodied* (mental), *objectified* (goods and services), or

institutional state, cultural capital "confers entirely original properties . . . which it is presumed to guarantee" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242).

Cultural capital is valued for its somewhat invisible nature in terms of transmission. Bourdieu (1986) explained,

> Because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital . . . to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence. . . . The symbolic logic of distinction secures material and symbolic profits for the possessors of large cultural capital. (p. 245)

The connection between "unrecognized invisibility" and the perception of cultural capital as "legitimate competence" (for not only is embodied cultural capital invisible to some, such invisibility also is often politically unacknowledged by those who possess it) perhaps is why capital transmission has been found to operate differently along racial lines. Although Bourdieu (1986) articulated that cultural capital could be acquired under certain conditions, he clarified that it "always remained marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition, and cannot be appropriated beyond the capacities of an individual agent. . . . It declines and dies with its bearer" (p. 245).

Cultural capital derives its power from its scarcity via limited access that provides distinction for its owner. In societies classified along racial lines, like the United States, cultural capital bears a double-edged sword: distinction and privilege for some and inequity for others. As the nonoriginal beneficiaries of U.S. education—due to a legacy of exclusionary practices as expressed by Ladson-Billing (1995), for example—it appears that the school system is structured so that African Americans are constantly attempting to capture the elusive cultural capital associated with academic equity and achievement. If the various forms of capital do indeed transcend one another, then the elusiveness of cultural capital transmission indicates a similar plight for the development of human capital so closely aligned with education.

CRT, because of its intention to address invisible structures and to name injuries bestowed by racism (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Yosso, 2002) is a fitting analytical lens for the investigating the transparency of capital transmission; the findings of this dissertation link it to the importance of an ethic of care and trust between school adults and students (discussed later). Recalling Shapiro's (2004) research on African American transmission of wealth and cultural and social capital, African Americans did so at decreased rates compared to their White peer

groups. Duncan (1969) and Massey et al.'s (2003) work on the transmission of human capital in higher education also indicated a noticeable gap between African Americans attainment and that of Whites. Similarly, cumulative disadvantage in educational disparities have been described as a racial education debt having implications for the academic and social development of precollege youth (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Massey et al., 2003; Massey & Denton, 2003).

Related to the discourse on capital transmission is the role that schools play. Massey et al. (2003) defined human capital as "the skills abilities, and knowledge possessed by specific individuals" (p. 222) of which education was identified as a form of human capital. Problems of equity concerning the transmission of capital become apparent considering that the appeal of capital accruement is based on privilege and scarcity that necessitate the invisibility of capital's privilege as Bourdieu (1977) suggested. In the classic discourse over the purpose of schools as a reflection of a stratified society, the in-school sorting process and obstacles to capital transmission become clear (Ballentine & Spade, 2004). For example, students are sorted according to their possession of certain skills and abilities prior to their entrance into high school (recall Oakes' work on tracking). African American students' coming to school having had experienced lower levels of European-based, middle-class cultural capital may be far more than an innocent result of differentiated community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2002). Bourdieu (1977) has indicated that capital transmission is neither random nor truly open in terms of its access. Therefore, its owners protect its transmission in the United States, in recognition that its scarcity continues to privilege its political, social, and economic value and their status as a dominant group.

The narrative descriptions offered in chapter 4 of this dissertation spoke to the tensions between the potential capacity-building function of school and capital transmission along racial lines. At one end, the African American student participants in this study were able to access varying levels of social capital through their ties to nonschool resources like the CAP, the local HBCU, their peers, and some in-school supports. For some, being members of the Elite Magnet provided weak social network ties (Granovetter, 1983) by which membership appeared to provide a window into the cultural capital experiences of their White Elite Magnet peers. The window permitted the students of the study to gain insight about what they were missing in terms of school support (e.g., Keisha and Grace). However, those ties were limited as the students discussed their identities as African Americans having either limited resources compared to their

Elite Magnet peers or as experiencing difficulties in terms of navigating their racial identities among their African American Bush High School peers and the in-school adults.

While the boundary surrounding capacity building regarding social and cultural capital access and transmission in school appeared to be blurred; the students involved in this study demonstrated a sense of self-agency that I interpreted as their personal aspirations. It appeared that familial supports and earlier awareness about college prior to their entry into the Bush and Elite schools served as foundations that combined with the students' sense of self-responsibility. Most of the students interviewed had this sense of agency or personal aspirations, to some extent. Where self-agency appeared low, it still surfaced as an emerging construct of importance to the student; the implication is that the combination of intrinsic aspirations and capacity building facilitated access to resources and inherently became a process of capital transmission.

Apparent in the narratives of this study were the students' coupled sense of agency and their desire to experience meaningful support from schools that the student consistently called for. Conversely, the student narratives indicated that when schools did not support them, they utilized their personal aspirations as a form of aspirational capital and their access to capacity-building systems outside of school. Their involvement in intervention programs like the CAP served as an example of how access to social capital facilitated students' exposure to cultural capital experiences like college field trips and career-related information sessions.

Massey et al. (2003) pointed out that whereas Bourdieu emphasized the perpetuation of social stratification inherent in cultural capital transmission, Farkas applied cultural capital transmission to education where "exposure to and prior knowledge of the social conventions of academia can be critical in preparing students for achieving success in a school environment (p. 6). Sense of place and acceptance via shared understandings are important in adjusting to academic environments (DiMaggio & Ostrower, as cited in Massey et al., 2003). The students' sense of belonging was also subjected to racial differences in terms of Black–White knowledge of "Euro-American high culture, which generally pervades" higher education (Massey et al., 2003, p. 6).

The literature, therefore, supports the schooling experiences expressed in the narratives of the students in this dissertation, who articulated differences between their selves, their racial peers, and their White "affluent" peers attending Elite. Faith's experience, for example, at a predominately White-populated middle school and her description of proper "valley-girl" talk as

she discussed her early exposure to college-prep discourse indicated that she received deeper information in terms of early college awareness at the middle school than during her time at a predominately minority-populated middle school. Keisha and Grace's narratives on the parental support enjoyed by their more affluent peers indicated that they perceived their White classmates to have benefited from cultural norms and additional support because of their White, middle-class status. Shawn's depiction of differences between Bush's present day "image-conscious" students and Elite's "future-oriented" students also fell along racial lines and reflected a gap in cultural capital transmission specific to accessing college. Their paths towards accessing college demonstrated a process of navigation that indicated racially impacted experiences concerning in school capacity building and capital transmission.

The students involved in this study appeared to be affected by social capital as a benefit ascribed to membership in their social space (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1990; Massey et al., 2003). In this case, school served as a limited social space by which the students involved in this study were able to gain insight and access to information and resources for college. The CAP served as a strong, consistent example of a nonschool, capacity-building social space for the acquisition of social capital among African American members of the program, who also attended the Elite and Bush schools. Therefore, a difference existed between the school and the CAP as capacity-building spaces that transmit social capital. At issue was the depth of college access knowledge and support received by the students. The general information and access to the CAP and HBCUs denoted experiences pertaining to the transmission of social capital. Network access to these programs and inclusion in the Elite Magnet Program served as an example of social capital transmission for some of the study participants. Varying cultural styles and norms between Bush and Elite school cultures and stark curricular practices indicated gaps in transmitting cultural and human capital for African American students. Of the three forms, I interpreted the descriptive narratives to have demonstrated that students had exposure to social capital via network memberships in supplemental intervention programs like the CAP. By the nature of their network ties via social capital, the African American students in Elite appeared to experience some form of cultural capital, though likely from loose network ties via their affluent White peers' articulated experiences (Granovetter, 1983).

In contrast, in-school capacity building seemed to be limited for African American students. African American students in Elite and Bush appeared to experience manipulative school practices (through curricular tracking and pedagogical support, for example) that rendered weaker school-based connections to human capital. However, the fragile connections to these formal forms of capital did not stop the students involved in this study from aspiring to college. Rather, the students worked from a personal sense of agency that demonstrated personal aspiration for college. In addition, their nonschool supports provided spaces and experiences of care and trust. The student's narratives, in contrast to their perspectives on school, did not indicate a negatively racialized persona associated with their nonschool support experiences. As such, I discuss the role of trust, care, and racial identity as the three major themes of this dissertation and their implications for capacity building via the school environment and the development of college aspirations among the students.

Trust, Care, and Racial Identity

Perhaps because of its assumed import, emphasis on trust and care in schools has been overshadowed. This is certainly the case in education policy, but even the literature has marginalized discussions of care and trust as supplemental rather than essential. The two fields that discuss the importance of trust and care for students with some depth are youth development studies (which are not widely reviewed by the larger education research community) and cultural studies or similar ethnic-related disciplines in education. Cultural studies too, have been marginalized in educational discourse that favors majoritarian perspectives on achievement.

Trust, care, and racial identity emerged as three major themes among the findings related to African American student perceptions of their school's capacity building environment and support for accessing college. Within these three major themes, issues of agency and support, assumptions and expectations, and communication and resources emerged. The student narratives of this study revealed that they developed coping strategies related to their decision-making processes. These coping strategies were based on how and what the schools and school adults communicated to them. Not only was it important that support and expectations were articulated from school adults to students, but the narratives of the project participants such as Hope, Simone, and Craig indicated that such communication also had to be credible.

Coping strategies were used based upon the students' perceived AROIE. The type of environment and the experiences associated with the presence of adult–student power

differentials impacted these students' relationships in terms of trust, care, identity, and their relation to communication and support in school. These same issues of trust and care were important to the ways students and adults communicated at the CAP as well. However, students of this study who were involved in nonschool capacity-building systems did not face the same issues of poor support and low expectations as in their school environments.

In the literature on minority youth experiences in school, communication, consistency, and support were embedded within the reoccurring theme of authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) and trust between school adults and students. A major finding of this study was the students' awareness and reaction to the presence of curricular and pedagogical tracking practices. These in-school practices influenced the school environment in terms of teacher expectations, support, and student achievement, which then affected trust and communication between students and school adults. Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) found that students expected to be treated respectfully and that such relationships, when developed in a spirit of trust, growth, and the ability to "take risks" (p. 80), provided students with the capacity needed to develop "school-based relationships" (p. 81) that increased their academic achievement.

In the previous discussion on tracking as an exclusionary practice of curricular and pedagogical methods, project participants identified Bush High School as having a largely African American and Hispanic student population that was perceived as undersupported and subsequently as underachieving. This contrasted with the Elite Magnet, which was described by project participants as having a predominately White and Asian student population and was viewed as high achieving and as providing access to a multitude of additional academic supports. Ferguson's (2008) model on *high help, high perfectionism* described the connection linking care, expectations, and support:

> The evidence suggests that students invest more effort under two instructional conditions . . . "high help" (i.e., when the teacher communicated convincingly that she likes it when they ask questions and loves to help when they get confused or make mistakes) and "high perfectionism" (i.e., when the teacher continually presses students to strive not only for understanding but also for accuracy as they complete their assignments). The combined effect of these two conditions appeared to be especially significant in classrooms where African Americans and Latino students were the majority. Insistence on correct answers (perfectionism) can be problematic in the absence of assistance. (p. 79)

The student narratives from this dissertation supported Ferguson's (2008) findings that students desire care and support from school adults. The students who participated in this study

did not always inform their teachers of their need for care and support directly, but they made the connection clear in their narratives. This finding validated the choice of a CRT frame and the related methodology of narrative inquiry to highlight participant voice and experience. For example, Hope described that she looked to see whether an adult was really listening to her in attempts to communicate with her. She acknowledged probing as an important technique in communicating with her because of her self-described shyness. A lack of initiative on the part of the adult meant that the conversation could go "downhill" from there, according to Hope. Active, productive relationships between school adults and youth are vital. Pollock (2008) asserted, "To a student, one action can change everything" (p. xviii). The narratives indicated that students surely paid attention to school and school adults, even when they appeared not to be doing so.

There is a relationship between care and trust as a means of capacity building and supporting aspirations in school. This in turn strengthens academic and social development. Nakkula and Toshalis (2008) drew a similar conclusion in their research. They described the connection between student learning and relational development as "new capacity . . . between peers and significant adults where a sense of trust, and the ability to grow and take risks were foundational" (p. 80). Furthermore, the development of this foundational capacity through school-based relationships translated to an increase in student academic achievement. The student narratives in this study repeatedly called attention to the importance of the school environment. The students sought a capacity-building space where learning engaged and prepared them for college. Positive, direct precollege support was limited in terms of the high school curriculum, pedagogical practices, and expectations for student development. In her work on subtractive schooling, Valenzuela (1999) described the impact of aliening practices on students:

> Universities' and college's insistence on student conformity to high school curriculum, regardless of whether that curriculum is challenging and supportive or degrading and meaningless, closes off an important avenue of potentially productive youth. (p. 99)

Regarding college aspirations, Valenzuela (1999) remarked, "There is little reason to bother aspiring to higher education if the price of admission must be prepaid in yearly installments of humiliation and alienation" (p. 99). Transforming schools into affirming capacity-building spaces for all students requires deep change in education as an institution. To do so warrants that care becomes a central aspect of education. A notion of caring "addresses the

need for pedagogy to follow from and flow through relationships cultivated between teacher and student" built with an "emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21).

The findings demonstrated that students preferred to have meaningful relationships with schools through sincere experiences with school adults and the adults' expressed belief in them as students. Earlier, I mentioned that although the students involved in this project did not always relay such desires to their school adults, such desires were apparent during their interviews with me. Why the difference in relating to me as opposed to some of the school adults like teachers? Valenzuela (1999) suggested, "Students' desire for reciprocal relationships with adults at school is tempered by their experience, which teaches them not to expect such relationships" (p. 104).

It seemed that my role as a researcher superseded my former role as a school adult (administrator) in their school. In addition, students involved in this study did not know me or associate poor prior experiences with me during my tenure at their school, positioning my former experience as an asset rather than a caution for them. They believed that my experience with the school gave me credibility. The students who participated in this project identified with our shared cultural and educational background. I became a type of "adult ally" associated with care. For example, I cared enough to ask the students about their perspectives. I cared enough to inquire about their lives. Are these not the things that school adults should do? I discuss the implications of my position as the author of this dissertation later. Regarding the environment, emphasis must be given toward developing schools as safe and supportive capacity-building spaces conducive to caring relationships. I discuss this further in the following sections on trust.

Trust

Trust and communication. In this dissertation, the term *trust* refers to the reliability of someone or something. The term *communication* refers to verbal and nonverbal cues and correspondence. The student narratives in this study demonstrated that trust and communication were interrelated.

The narratives revealed students' attempts to communicate with their teachers and high school counselors and the effect of such tentative relationships with school adults. The narratives repeatedly offered that trusting relationships, which require time to establish, were essential in effective communication styles between adult and youth. This is supported by Valenzuela (1999)

and Delpit's (1996) theories on the ethic of caring. The narratives demonstrated that students judged whether they perceived their teacher and counselor attitudes to be authentic.

All 7 students in this study described successful relationships as involving mutual respect. They described some teachers as being "like friends." Yet, even with these teachers and counselors, 4 of the student participants expressed a fear of failing or letting the adult down. Some, like Hope, explained that "fear of rejection" was why she chose not to share her application to a Japanese study abroad program of an American university with her high school Japanese teacher, although he appeared to be someone she seemed to trust and with whom communication seemed a natural fit. Other examples of the relationship between trust, care, and communication in student–adult relationships in school included Simone's fear of her science teacher, who she perceived as "always staring" at her. Simone's discomfort with her math teacher's public impatience with another student, whom she perceived as similar to her, was also problematic. In her example, Simone referred to the student as having "the same problems . . . but he asks questions." That this "similar student" was brave enough to inquire but was publicly shut down by his teacher was enough to interrupt Simone's own attempt to reach out for assistance from the teacher.

Regarding trust and communication, Shawn once commented that Bush students "somewhere . . . must have been lied to." His comment was in response to my sharing an observation that his Bush peers did not seem to "believe" in what was told to them easily. From these narratives I suggest that the relationships between these students and their school adults must not be taken for granted. They must be well articulated, sincere, and consistent. Ongoing, deep, and consistent support over the years of schooling benefit the cultivation of college aspiration and strengthen students' academic and social development (Gordon, 2007; Greeno, 2007). When mistrust was present, the students in this study referred to coping strategies mentioned earlier in this chapter. I describe the relationship between mistrust, miscommunication, and silence next.

Mistrust, miscommunication, and silence. Mistrust and miscommunication occurred in the absence of reliability and sincere dialogue. The narratives demonstrated that miscommunication and mistrust occurred whether perceived or substantiated. *Silence* refers to inaction that was expressed verbally, physically, emotionally, and mentally in terms of the interpreted efforts that the student narratives indicated.

The narratives indicated that fear and mistrust impacted issues of miscommunication between students and adults. A constant concern of peer and adult perceptions of her caused Hope to stifle her identity throughout her P–12 schooling experience. She admitted not pushing herself as hard as she might have because she perceived the payoff to be limited. This finding coincided with the AROIE concept described earlier in this chapter. Stating that she rarely disagreed with her peers or adults, Hope described limited conflict with peers or adults because she feared the consequences. She opted to use silence as her tool for communication. Unfortunately this technique as a coping strategy remains misunderstood by many adults, particularly educators. Instead, the strategy often earns students who employ it the label of being "lazy," "apathetic," or "lacking in ability."

Several researchers (e.g., Delpit, 1996; Perry et al., 2003; Tatum, 1997) have identified some form of these behaviors concerning the interplay among race, identity, and schools for African American students. Unfortunately, deficit theories remain prominent in spite of these particular researchers' culturally centered critical analyses. While the findings of this dissertation advance the issue, more work must be done to broaden the perspective of these deeper interpretations behind student actions.

Hope's fears are well masked because of her ability to perform at least to the minimum expectation of her school. Because she is not failing and she is part of the Elite Magnet, she is allowed to pass through the system. Hers is an often-repeated scenario involving high adult expectations but much lower support in lieu of those expectations (Ferguson, 2008). Hilliard (2000a, Hilliard, 2000b, Hilliard, 2000c) pointed out minimum competency standards as examples of schools' low expectations of African American students. African American students are often expected to underperform in schools, and so passing the minimum is rewarded rather than supporting students and expecting them achieve excellence.

Race appeared to have played an exacerbating role in all 7 of these students' limited school support and expectations. Research investigating impressions about African American children has explored stereotypes that Black children do not have the will, skill, and home or community support to help them achieve at high and consistent rates (Delpit, 1996; Hilliard, 1997, 1998; Ladson Billings, 1994; Ogbu, 1987, 1991, 2003). Research also has examined the assumptions that Black students' silence is normal rather than a cry for help—for which school adults must be held responsible for responding to with deep, authentic care (Delpit, 1996). The

expectation that Black students can be held to a lower level of academic and social development mainly because of their race and perceived genetic predisposition (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) is appalling. More importantly, it is a theoretical concept in the literature with links to some belief systems in popular culture. Such race-baited perspectives on achievement shape problematic schooling environments for these students and were observed in their narratives. Furthermore, the collision of these false values diminishes a successful connection between these African American students' aspirations for and access to college. The purporting of racialized differences in theoretical and social belief systems in terms of ability and achievement presents some possible explanation for the gap between schools as capacity-building institutions that support African American student aspirations for college and their knowledge and practices to achieve admission to college.

In turn for their silence, the 5 students in Group 1 (members of the CAP) and the 2 students in Group 2 (non-CAP) of this dissertation appear to be receiving, processing, and internalizing signals about adult interaction that they are likely to carry into adulthood and other experiences. All 7 student participants reported that they aspired to attend college. Assuming that they go on to graduate school (as many have indicated an interest in pursuing), I considered at what point and in what ways these early might experiences affect them as they continue to navigate power relationships with college professors throughout undergraduate and graduate school. This is a particular concern for those researching the P–20 educational pipeline and the comparatively dismal rates of degree completion among African Americans and other racial minorities in U.S. doctoral programs. I reflect upon my own position and experiences in researching this topic later, in the section on author position. As a response to racially denigrating theories, I explored ethnic concepts that engage the relationship between care in education as it relates to capacity building and capital transmission. The next section describes such a relationship.

Care

Ethnic concepts on care and achievement: Expectations, assumptions, and transmission. In her work on the ethic of care and in-school relationships, Valenzuela (1999) stated, "Social capital . . . emphasizes exchange networks of trust and solidarity among actors wishing to attain goals that cannot be individually attained" (p. 21). Her concept of social capital differs from the capitalist view. She emphasized the social aspect, where traditional frames have focused on

capital in terms of its economical and tangible values. Of the relationship among school, care, and social and human capital, Valenzuela (1999) explained,

> Positive social relationships at school are highly productive because they allow for the accumulation of social capital that can be converted into valued resources or opportunities (e.g., good grades, a high school diploma, access to privileged information, etc). Beyond helping individuals attain such human capital as education and skills, capital fosters the development of trust, norms, and expectations among youth who come to share a similar goal-orientation . . . towards schooling. (p. 28)

Her conceptualization denotes a reciprocal relationship with care as a facilitator of capital in school.

Valenzuela (1999) looked to Nodding's framework, positing that "the caring teacher's role is to initiate relation, with engrossment in the student's welfare flowing from this search for connection" (p. 21). Inherent to this concept, schools are expected to serve as sites where supportive student–adult relationships serve as facilitators of capital needed for academic and social development. Valenzuela (1999) confirmed this relationship:

> A teacher's attitudinal disposition is essential to caring, for it overtly conveys acceptance and confirmation to the cared-for student. When the cared-for individual responds by demonstrating a willingness to reveal her/his essential self, the reciprocal relation is complete. (p. 21)

Valenzuela (1999) connected Nodding's notion of caring to an ethnic concept that she referenced within the Mexican and Mexican American cultural term, *educacion*: "Educacion is a conceptually broader term than its English language cognate. It refers to the family's role of incubating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning" (p. 23). This term is reminiscent of the southern Black phrase *good* or *bad blood*, which refers to one's "proper" or "improper" upbringing among the southern-based, native African American culture indigenous to the United States (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Another similar term in the African American culture refers to achieving one's complete or *full* level of education. Recall Simone's quote where she referred to her grandmother's desire for her to get her "full education." As Valenzuela used *educacion* to connect her notion of care to the youth of her study, I too recognize *full education* as a cultural term steeped in the ethic of care for the southern African American heritage.

While *educacion* (and by extension indigenous African American terms like *good blood* and *full education*) have "implications for pedagogy, it is first a foundational cultural construct

that provides instructions for how one should live in the world" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). According to Valenzuela (1999),

> Though inclusive of formal academic training, these terms additionally refer to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others. This person-, as opposed to object-, orientation further suggests the futility of academic knowledge and skills when individuals do not know how to live in the world as caring, responsible, well mannered, and respectful human beings. (p. 23)

Similar to the concept of getting one's full education, Valenzuela (1999) asserted that *educacion* represented both the objective and the outcome of a holistic process. Valenzuela warned of a disconnect when teachers go unaware of their student's cultural communities concepts: "When teachers deny their students the opportunity to engage in reciprocal relationships, they simultaneously invalidate the definition of education that most of these young people embrace" (p. 23).

Similarly, when deep, authentic care was not a feature in the school site of this study, a cultural disconnect on expectations occurred between the students involved in this study and their school environments. The student narratives demonstrated a disconnect between the emotional expectation, support, and communication that students received from home versus the lack of expectations, support, and communication that they experienced in their various school settings. This phenomenon of a cultural disconnect on the notion of full education between student and family expectations versus that of the school resulted in lost opportunity for schools to promote academic and social development in deep, meaningful ways for the students involved in this study. The loss translates to a missed opportunity on behalf of the school to serve as a powerful capacity-building space. Schools otherwise could build upon relationships between adults and youth characterized by care, trust, high expectations, and support that stimulate students' sense of personal agency. The next section discusses human relationships and student motivation to achieve in terms of agency and support.

The importance of human relationships and students' motivation to achieve: Agency and support. Human relations are an important aspect of students' motivation to achieve. Relations with school personnel, especially with teachers, play a decisive role in determining the extent to which youth find the school to be welcoming or alienating (Valenzuela, 1999). Recall Craig's sense of gratitude to the CAP and school adults whom he perceived as helping him with

academic difficulties. Similarly, Shawn offered the same sense of gratitude towards his grandmother for her consistent support.

Valenzuela (1999) described a similar situation, as U.S. youth "frequently expressed their affiliation needs in terms of caring" (p. 7). The findings of this dissertation through the narratives demonstrated that when coupled with supportive relationships, care influenced motivation and strengthened personal college aspirations. For the youth involved in this study, human relationships have important meaning in the process of creating capacity-building, information-rich environments and in terms of preparing for and accessing college.

Agency and support surfaced as additional factors among participant narratives. In this dissertation the term *agency* refers to students' sense of personal action to achieve a particular result. Agency was largely defined within the student participants' narratives as connected to their own sense of personal responsibility. It denoted a sense of personal aspiration. The term *support* refers to the external help received by the students. Their narratives indicated that support came in a variety of forms that included parents, peers, supplemental programs, and school. In this case the narratives demonstrated agency and support as a reciprocal phenomenon that linked student aspirations, motivations, and actions. Agency was a product of their sense of personal responsibility and their expectations for the roles that adults and schools played in facilitating agency and support for the students' college readiness.

Findings from the narratives revealed that the participants faced challenges in navigating school-adult expectations of their academic pursuits. The degrees of challenge varied according to (a) whether the student was enrolled in Bush or Elite, (b) individual enrollment in the CAP, (c) the types of support received or not received in school, and (d) the impact of parental expectations. Five out of the 7 students reported that the school adults they interacted with appeared inadequately aware or supportive of their personal and developmental needs. More so, while the students appeared to understand their own self-identified needs, they articulated difficulty in communicating them to their school adults. As a result, communication appeared to be stifled by fear and self-doubt. This difficulty was exacerbated by their perception that not all adults believed in them and that the adults were not committed to the students' successful navigation into desired universities or colleges. All 7 student narratives supported this finding.

Well-meaning educators in the Elite Magnet school were perceived by 4 of the Elite students as diverting them away from aspiring to attend top universities. This was done directly

and indirectly. Direct methods included imparting a sense that the universities that they aspired to attend were "impossible" to achieve (as indicated by Craig's narrative). According to 4 participants' personal narratives, indirect methods of this diversion from aspiring to top colleges among otherwise well-meaning Elite educators spoke to the pedagogical weakness of even those teachers whom the students perceived as "smart" but "cannot teach" (Keisha, Grace, and Hope). Participant narratives described some degree of unfulfilling schooling environments. Descriptors such as "boring" are often mistaken and dismissed for a lack of student discipline. One should take seriously and reconsider this assertion as more than an empty accusation. School as "boring" is decoded and takes on a particular meaning upon examining the term's collective and repetitive use in describing why some students disengaged to some degree in the schooling process.

Valenzuela (1999) found a similar occurrence in her 3-year study of U.S. and Mexican youth experiences in the southwest United States. Disengagement took different forms. Rather than a complete withdrawal from school activities (most notably established in educational research on dropouts and low achievement), the results of this study similarly required an extended definition. It was useful to think of disengagement in terms of the application of varying levels of effort. For some participants like Hope, disengagement occurred through partial completion of an assignment (3 out of 7 narratives supported this type of disengagement). For others such as Craig and Simone, the assignment was completed, but the student was aware that he or she could have done better (4 out of 7 supported this type). And yet, all 7 student participants reported that for some students the process of disengaging meant that they maintained their presence in the schools but were less visible in the classroom (e.g., skipping class or silence). Recall Simone's narrative, which described her utilization of a strategy to facilitate limited engagement in her math class: "I write down the assignment, even though I don't know what is going on. And then I try to turn the assignment in late, so he doesn't see. I turn it in and walk out the door." Disengagement, in its varied forms, was indeed an issue and strategy, as articulated in 5 of the 7 interviews.

Discourse (academic and practitioner) at the campus, district, state, and national levels has focused on representative groups of students who have been identified as inactive, as academic under-performers. These students are depicted as lazy or as simply unwilling to succeed. Through these 7 students' narratives, I have observed something deeper that indicated

evidence of the opposite. Returning to the earlier mentioned process of communication, the narratives uncover the application of decision-making processes that all student narratives reflected. Faith, Craig, Hope, Keisha, Grace, Shawn, and Simone all engaged in a process of internalizing what had been communicated to them from the school by way of a divergent curriculum, pedagogical practices, and tepid expectations and support from school adults. Their narratives indicated that they then made decisions about which strategies to use based on the return that they received for their input (the outcome). Recall that Hope articulated caution so that she did not "overexcel and chance" her work. I interpreted this as one type of coping strategy having to do with students' decision-making based on their AROIE within in the schooling process. Their decision making indicated that these students operated from a sense of self-agency. All 7 students estimated outcomes and employed strategies based on whether they would see an optimal return—whether they believed their efforts would be matched by adult support, recognition, and ultimately admission into their colleges of choice.

Ferguson's (2008) research with the Tripod Project for School Improvement supported this finding. He found that student investment in academic work increased for African American and Latino students in classrooms where teachers demonstrated pedagogical practices that emphasized a combination of high help and high perfectionism.

At the heart of this process of communication and internalization was perceived trust. The narratives overwhelmingly revealed that the students required a sense of trust regarding teacher and counselor beliefs in their ability as students. They needed to sense that their own personal efforts as students would have successful, intentional results (in this case, accessing and attending their preferred colleges). Such observations were interpreted as forms of agency in the presence of varied levels of support. In addition, their narratives revealed that the student participants wanted to trust the curricular and pedagogical principles within their school. They desired and expected their school's curriculum and pedagogical practices to be relevant and adequately prepare them for success beyond secondary education.

Faith, Craig, Hope, Keisha, Grace, and Shawn also emphasized the necessity of "fun" schooling environments, which I decoded as "engaging." Their narratives demonstrated disagreement with principles that view learning as objective and void of linking education to real-life applications. Instead, they articulated a demand for both (recall Craig's quote and Shawn's quote about permitting a boring lecture "every once" in a while). All 7 of the student

narratives implied this balance was more likely a natural practice in the school for their White and Asian Elite Magnet counterparts, whom they viewed as enjoying a deeper level of privilege.

In terms of agency and support, the narratives of this study offered that student aspirations were nurtured by support from parents, family members, and outside school supports such as the CAP highlighted in this study. Aspirations and self-agency appeared to be about relationships for students who expressed a dual sense of personal responsibility while seeking in-school support from school adults such as teachers, counselors, and administrators. Their narratives indicated that the presence of racial identities in school affected their relationships with school adults. In the next section, I discuss racial identity development and its influence on school environment and support.

Racial Identity

Racial identity development and in-school peers. The student narratives demonstrated *school identity reflexivity*, that is, that the issues described in this dissertation impacted and were impacted by the students' in-school racial identities. The narratives of Hope, Keisha, Grace, and Shawn, in particular, demonstrated this school identity reflexivity. Hope discussed the relationship of her identity in terms of her peers and her use of silence to appear invisible in class. Keisha and Grace described their experiences as Black students navigating the Elite and Bush programs in terms of peer relationships and teacher attitudes. Shawn described his reputation in school and the social-academic categories into which students are grouped.

"Everyday antiracism requires both addressing people's experiences in the world as racial group members and refusing to distort people's experiences, thoughts, or abilities by seeing them only or falsely through a racial lens" (Pollock, 2008, p. xix). The next section discusses racial identity in terms of perceptions and coping strategies.

Racial identity, perception, and coping strategies. Under conditions of institutionalized oppression, Ogbu (1991) observed that students' ethnic minority identities became collective expressions that protected them against the "potentially damaging psychological elements embedded within the dominant, individualistic model of mobility" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 18). The CRT perspective would have us ask, What identity are we pointing towards and claiming as that of Black youth? How are we communicating messages about their identity that they in turn internalize? And how are such internalizations manifested in schools and society? A CRT perspective would have one recognize the experiences that these youth undergo as a result of

racialized constructs about their performances. Unfortunately, Ogbu's concept has been used in purporting deficit views of African American youth that overgeneralize underachievement in terms of their behavior and academic achievement. Alternatively, the narrative findings of this study provide an expanded view of students' academic and social development in line with the principles of CRT. In line with the critical race perspective, this study places at the forefront the views, perceptions, and experiences of the African American youth who participated in this project. Their voice is centered as the expert on the issues of concern as expressed by them.

While the narratives of this study demonstrated that Faith, Hope, Keisha, Grace, Simone, Craig, and Shawn had limited patience for what they perceived as their peer's excuses for being "off task," they also offered insight about the types of school obstacles that they and their peers faced. These obstacles included the conferring of racial identities upon the students, which led to differential treatment of the students in both the Bush High School and Elite Magnet Program in terms of adult attitude, support, expectations, and curricular exposure.

The students' responses indicated that they used coping strategies as forms of self-agency. The coping strategies included the drop-down method, in which Black Elite Magnet students transferred to Bush as a means of protecting their academic rank; trial-and-error; consistent persistence or hope-based strategies; and silence. The descriptions of these coping strategies categories are interpretations of the decision-based techniques that were articulated by the students included in this dissertation. In lieu of the impact of racial identities in school, the following section discusses the connection between racial identity, school environment, and resources.

Racial identity, school environment, and resources. School environment refers to the physical school structure and school atmosphere. Participant narratives described interactions between school adults and the students participating in this study and their engagement with the Bush and Elite Magnet curricula. For the Black Elite Magnet students participating in this study, conversations about college were often intertwined with a discussion about the Elite Magnet Program, its resources, and expectations tied to those resources. Out of the narratives of the 5 Elite students and 2 Bush students who provided their own observations of life in Elite and Bush, findings revealed differences in how Black Elite students were treated. My study participants did not always refer to issues that they faced solely as racial issues, but there was an emphasis in their narratives on the lack of assistance for those students who were not as well prepared from

the onset of their schooling, which coincided with their African American peers. All 5 student descriptions indicated that these issues are factors for Black students in the Elite Magnet Program. Three students discussed the direct assumptions latent in comments to them as students seeking help from some of the Elite teachers and counselors. These included statements like, "You are in Elite, what do you expect?" (Hope, Keisha, and Grace). They described adults' passive attitudes towards African American students requiring further assistance through comments that assumed that these students' success was predicated on the mere fact that they had been admitted into the program. The students of the study cited comments like, "You are in Elite, it will be okay" (Grace and Keisha).

The narratives indicated that the students were aware of high expectations that were not consistently coupled with high support. This is in direct opposition to what prevailing literature held as required most for supporting high achievement. Particularly among African Americans, high expectations, high hope, or "high help with high perfectionism" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 78) was lacking at the school site of this study. Without it *visionless expectations* developed, that is, expectations with no clear vision as to the process of achieving the objective. The 7 students I interviewed were clearly expectant in terms of requiring a connection between their schooling and the future for which they are preparing. Their narratives indicated a specific challenge that Black students who attended the Elite Magnet faced.

Despite these challenges, all 7 students demonstrated an expectation to perform at the same levels of their successful peers. However, even with this goal of academic success in mind, accomplishing such goals became increasingly challenging because, as the 5 students shared, Elite Magnet school adults assumed that just being in Elite was an accomplishment for these specific minority students. When students like Hope sought to improve their grades, they did not appear to have the well-rounded school support to achieve this. An expectations–support–achievement gap became evident. Recall Hope's narrative, "The students [in Elite] are already smarter than you because they have been concentrating on this since middle school. Their parents pushed them into it, while me, I just kind of gradually let it happen." Regarding improving her grades, Hope discussed the challenges that she faced in Elite and the difficulties presented in her attempts to make herself college marketable:

> One thing [challenge] would be the grades. Because our school goes up to a 4.8, it's so hard. . . . I push myself to get better grades, [it] is killing me 'cause you have to make As to change your GPA. . . . And the freshman, they were really smart, and so they are like,

> "I did this really fast" [referring to an assignment], and then there are the rest of us who have gotta like, "Actually let me study this for like a week. Let me memorize this or something." But she [her teacher] viewed us as capable and so she assigned work after work after work, and like the next day on to a new chapter and on to a new chapter, and I don't think she understood that most of us needed time. Some teachers don't understand the students very well.

Hope's narrative critiqued teacher's roles in understanding their students, implying that sincere, deep, and meaningful relationships between teachers and their students might prove beneficial to pedagogical strategies and learning outcomes. Recall Keisha's description of her perspective on the lack of support for students requiring assistance in Elite:

> The thing is, they feel like we are up at the top and like [for those in Elite] at the bottom, it's like, "Oh, don't worry, everyone is going to college." But for some [students in Elite], they really don't know if they are going to college.

This illustrates powerfully the need for support via high help and high expectations. The practice of assuming that presence in Elite is an automatic ticket for accessing college disservices some students. Keisha went on to reveal that when Black students are unable to find the support they need, they interpret schooling in Elite as being least effective for them:

> The Asian and White kids are doing all fine, and some of the Hispanic and African American kids don't feel—like, I don't know, the Black girls—a few who wish there were more resources and teachers to help. But they let you do whatever and you don't understand.

Keisha went on to discuss financial resource issues that affected her peers. She also described the impact of teacher miscommunication and student inability to fully articulate their problems relating to their school assignments:

> Sometimes you have to buy books and you can't afford to buy the books. You say, "Well, I can't get the book," and the teacher is like, "Well, get the book." You say, "Well, I can't get the book," and the teacher says, "Well, you failed the quiz."

Two of the student narratives of this study demonstrated students' attempt to create strategies to avoid failing by sharing books and going to the library, although that strategy was not always useful due the difficulty in locating certain books.

Some of the students, like Craig, endured teachers' doubt of what he could accomplish. This was evident in Craig's testimony that some teachers have specific mindsets regarding which colleges are appropriate or inappropriate for their Black students:

> Well some of my teachers, I don't know. Being African male, some of my teachers thought my choices were—if my choices were like Ivy Leagues, like, some of my teachers were like, "Well, maybe you need to work harder," which I do need to work harder, but some of them make it seem like it's just impossible, and I didn't like that. They weren't showing me support.

While Craig and his peers faced opposition to their specific college aspirations from some teachers, Craig offered that direct instructions about what was required of his particular college choices defined the characteristics of a good teacher who was interested and who cared about the aspirations of his or her students. Craig said, "But the real teachers who had faith in me, they actually helped me out, 'This is what you need to do.' They really helped."

The situation of adult–student expectations and support in the schooling environment was not limited to the Elite Magnet Program. The narratives of student participants who were in the Bush High School indicated that they too struggled with finding academic support from school adults. Their perception of unskilled teacher support exacerbated the miscommunication between these students and their teachers. As a result, the school cannot reach its potential as a capacity-building support for the students participating in this study and others like them. For the Black students participating in this study who attended the Elite Magnet Program, their Elite membership situated them in a virtual no man's world between Elite and Bush. This identity-based "black hole" was not limited to their academic world. These students faced social issues that stemmed from both Elite and Bush.

Racial identity and environment: "Upstairs–downstairs" issues between Bush High School and Elite Magnet. The 5 student participants who were enrolled in the Elite Magnet Program attempted a delicate balance in navigating a complicated intersection of their identity as Black students who attended Elite despite a social connection to Bush, where many of their racial peers had classes. All 7 students participating in this study reported that tensions between students of both schools, regardless of their race, had increased since the split was made official. As reported in chapter 4, most described an initial student resistance to the school divide, followed by acquiescence. Craig reported,

> Some students protested before it happened [the official split] 'cause they didn't want the school to be separated. And the model is like "two schools, one family," but now it is more like two schools, two separate families. That's how some students feel. . . . So you can definitely tell when you walk in the school, racial tension, you know, between the schools.

The participants in Bush described tensions with their Black peers in Bush. Craig continued,

> Well, at school, since we have two schools, they try to be funny like, "Shouldn't you be upstairs by now?" 'Cause I gotta go upstairs. They, downstairs, are like, "Aw, you think you are smart". You know, the little stereotypes between both schools. I'm like, "It's nothing like that," 'cause I still claim both schools. I still keep it real with everybody. It's not just [that] I signal one—yeah, I go to one school, but I still talk to Bush, the kids downstairs and whatever. So some of my friends be joking, but they be for real, you know, like, come on it's not even cool. We're supposed to be tight. Just 'cause of a little split, it's not supposed to separate us. That just makes me mad.

All 7 student narratives alluded to an "upstairs, downstairs" reference that was evident throughout their discussions regarding Bush and Elite. It referred to the literal locale of each program-turned-"individual" school site, housed within the same building. The implication was disturbing because the description of Bush, a school full of Black kids, was routinely described as "down." Both Bush and Elite students and staff used this term to refer to the two school program sites regularly. Recall Keisha's description of her experience with Black peers in Bush and their references to Elite's location as "up": "Most of my Bush friends are like, 'Go back upstairs' and, 'Y'all think you are better.'"

The narratives of this study on college aspirations, support, and development for college access demonstrated that such differentiated schooling practices were perceived by the students as negatively determined by their racial identities. Keisha, Grace, Craig, Simone, and Shawn's narratives demonstrated powerfully both their perspectives on their racial identities and on the ways that they navigated racial identities at school, with adults and among their peers. Keisha and Grace's example of being told to "go back up there" was similar to Craig's recollection of peers who chided him, "Shouldn't you be upstairs by now?" The comments were provided in the context of my discussion with each of them on the issue of racial divide at the school site between Elite Magnet and Bush High School. Craig's comment that he "still keep[s] it real with everybody" referred to his desire to be accepted by his Black racial peers who attended Bush High School downstairs, apart from his Elite classes.

Each participant discussed his or her perceived racial identity at some point during the interviews, some more directly than others. The level of directness appeared, in some ways, to be a symptom of the student's sense of politeness when discussing race. Recall Simone's description, for example, of a White peer as "very, very light." This served as one instance where she continued to discuss race in polite terms. Simone used this approach until I simply told her

that it was "ok to say 'White.'" Recall that Faith, normally very opinionated, engaged in the same "polite talk" on race. Keisha, on the other hand, exemplified one who was not at all concerned with racial polite talk. For Keisha, things were as they were, and she addressed them accordingly.

The literature on Black student achievement suggests that Black students perceive academic success as a function of Whiteness (Ogbu & Fordham, 1986), but Simone's narrative countered this theory. She described the difference between herself and her sister, who identified acting White as acting "perfect." While Simone recognized different behaviors among African Americans, she believed that calling someone who is Black "White" because they excelled was as "silly" as calling someone "Black" because they "acted up." Yet, how often are everyday concepts codified in terms of Black and White race relations? Phrases in both youth and popular culture refer to incredulous moments as "ghetto" or "Black," whereas Whiteness is aligned with notions of purity and properness (Bell-Hooks, 1981, 1994; Delpit, 1996; Fanon, 1967).

The narrative findings from my research on African American youth perspectives on aspirations, capacity-building forms of support, and academic and social development for college access indicated that, similar to Valenzuela's (1999) work, the subtractive practices of K–12 institutions on minority youth remain an example of mainstream institutions that "strip away students' identities, thus weakening or precluding supportive social ties and draining resources important to academic success" (p. 10). However, the students included in this dissertation obtain support from other resources, one of them being the CAP.

Communication and Resources: Capacity Building via Comparison of the CAP and Other Supplemental Interventions and Support to School

I described *capacity-building systems* as the intervention (programs) and support (people) systems available and utilized by the students participating in this study. The 5 students who participated in the university-sponsored CAP also described access to college-preparation support as an issue of concern and focus. In comparing their school program to the CAP, their narratives reflected the CAP's ability to "come to them" as a welcome advantage. Some expressed concerns that wide outreach efforts of the university program could not possibly support all student participants successfully. Recall that Hope initially thought that the program's outreach efforts would be short lived or ineffective because of the large number of students she perceived the program to target: "Over the years, I realized the CAP was a different type of

program. That's all I thought in the beginning was, "They are going to leave soon." This one, you are actually in contact with people and they offer things [programs] in your area." To the contrary, what Hope found, and shared in her narrative, spoke to the consistent, collective support of the CAP as an intervention for the participants. The outcomes indicated promising solutions for educational practice and policy.

Craig also shared that the CAP supported his aspirations for college by motivating him to continue in his work in the face of obstacles:

> It helps me, you know another supportive group to give me information about [a specific college], motivates me to do better in school 'cause sometimes I probably be falling off, but its like, "No, don't worry, you are going to pick yourself back up," which I usually do, or even higher than I was. Like an extra push and an extra resource.

The CAP provided early academic preparation for participants of this study who were enrolled in its First Start rising ninth graders program. For most of the students who participated in this dissertation, capacity building for college and academic and social development occurred as a result of strong familial supports coupled with out-of-school interventions such as the CAP. While the CAP provided students with more of the detailed academic support required to prepare for and access college, another valuable service was its role as a safe space for the students participating in this study. Personal relationships with caring adults who were focused on helping students access and transition to college meant that the CAP and the other intervention programs became intentional spaces for the student. Students therefore had a solid grasp of the purpose, intent, and plan for their involvement in these nonschool spaces. Coupled with deep familial care and ongoing intervention, each student's own personal aspirations for college were strengthened.

The presence of personal or self- agency, recognition of their personal responsibilities to stay on task, and decision making as to which strategies would assist them through school indicated that these students had a sense of personal capital that related to their aspirations (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2002). It appeared that personal capital encompassed all of these traits (aspirations, self-agency, responsibility, and identity). The connections between their capacity-building systems (at school, at home, and at the CAP or other intervention programs, like the local HBCU) and personal capital impacted how these students' concepts of care, trust, and racial identity were enacted. At school, these issues created an environment that impeded the transmission of capital for these students' college aspirations and access. The nonschool

programs helped to fill the gap left by dichotomized schooling practices so that the students in this study were able to access college in spite of their poor schooling circumstances.

The findings of this study indicate that schooling works for those who have richly lined head starts in their academic preparation and who also benefit from ongoing support of their academic development throughout their P–12 schooling. The problem is that this cumulative and ongoing head start is realized for only a few of those in today's P–12 schooling system. This circumstance is exacerbated by growing demographic trends in the United States that predict increases in minority racial populations such as Hispanics but especially African Americans, who traditionally have been marginalized and underserved in economic, social, and educational supports important for productive, healthy lives. In contrast to those with strong academic preparation and ongoing support, the participants in this dissertation represent P–12 populations who navigate a limited P–12 system and compete with their more privileged peers to access the same goal: higher education.

The path appears to be a dichotomous one. The first path consists of information, training, encouragement, and support that is an ongoing, cumulative process. The second path is far more difficult. It is marked by strong aspirations and family support. But this second path incurs obstacles from schools via a deeply entrenched culture of tracking, often racialized and difficult to overcome. These pathways to college are inextricably linked to racial inequities of society at large, which are played out in the schools. This racialized, school-based stratification impacts student opportunities to learn, achieve, and more specifically to access and transition into college. Furthermore, even when students are able to access college, decisions about the types of colleges that they are able to strive for are shaped by racially stereotyped overtures concerning where these students "belong."

The narratives of my study demonstrated that these students acted from a sense of personal responsibility and self-agency. Rather than opt out of the college access pathway, the findings of this study reflect that these students employ strategies to overcome the barriers that they face in order to access higher education. These students' strategies involve an awareness and perspective of the schooling process, which included the political, economic, and racial overtures espoused from school adults and school peers.

In the next section, I present implications that the findings have for policy (and by extension, research and practice). I discuss a racial identity gap in education policy and the CRT

response, implications for the role of aspiration in personal capital and college access, and the role of capacity-building systems through processes of intervention and support.

Implications and Policy Considerations

Racial Identity and the Gap in Educational Policy: A CRT Response

There is an apparent disconnect between the needs and expectations of the students participating in this project and those of their schools. The findings of this dissertation implied a disconnect that has not been addressed substantially by educational policies. The literature that speaks to the question of why some African American students react to schooling as they do is incomplete in educational research and is marginalized in educational policy. Rather than centering contextual explanations as policy solutions, the literature largely relegates contextually derived research to the background of this line of inquiry. The research agendas, literature, and studies that do seek to address the phenomena of inequity and the African American educational gap directly are often thought of as discursive subfields, even though the call to take substantive action has reached an undeniable need (King, 2005; Tillman, 2008). Examples include research that uses broad categorical descriptions paired with baggage-laden language, pregnant with negative connotations, in academic discourse to pinpoint and explain the educational divide between African Americans and their White peers. Descriptors such as *minority education, at-risk, low socioeconomic status*, and *disadvantaged* are a few examples of such deficit labels used to address African American issues as they relate to education. When considering the focus and findings of this study through a CRT lens, four issues become apparent:

1. At present, education policy is missing a full account of the context-rich experiences of African American students shaped by the historic, social, economic, and political occurrences that have created the racialized environment the students of this study navigate.

2. Recognition of these experiences, through the narratives of the youth who participated in this study, can lead to the development and enactment of informed policy that would improve the school environment in terms of helping all students successfully access college.

3. Curricular tracking in the school of this study has advanced internal school segregation under the guise of magnet education.

4. Nonschool supports do exist, and although they are useful, when relied on as a substitution for the roles of the school they may result in truncating the number of students who can access college.

Researchers who have taken up the examination of these methodological and theoretical disparities included Hilliard (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2003, 2007) and Delpit (1996), whose work first and foremost centered on the belief that all kids, including African American children, come ready to learn and capable of achieving at high levels. Their work and others' also challenged existing popular research that purports negative images of African American attitudes towards education. Their work counters the negative images that have been publicly communicated (perhaps unintentionally) as a result of the use of incomplete terminology and decontextual research methods used to "examine" Black–White gaps in school. An example of this would be the work and interpretation of Ogbu's studies on African Americans attitudes toward education. Other less obvious (and therefore more dangerous) examples include the work of a myriad of researchers who categorically lump all "minority issues" together in their research on education gaps without providing accurate contexts of the each group's own history and experiences that shape their current educational concerns.

Hilliard and Delpit, part historically, contextually, and practically, disarm stereotypes that have saturated policy and politics surrounding Black education and the Black community's capacity to achieve (Tillman, 2008). A framework that moves their work to policy is needed. CRT in education has attempted to uncover the silenced voices and perspectives of African American experience in education. As a theoretical tool, it has served the need of researchers conducting studies similar to this dissertation, where the purpose is to center the voice and situation of the participant in order to develop the context of the study. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2000) and Lynn (2006) are among the many African American scholars who have used CRT to examine issues of race in education, in teacher pedagogy, and in curriculum and instruction. They use their work to make suggestions on how to reprogram society and schools to operate with cultural sensitivity (Tillman, 2002) and relevancy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998).

Lynn (2006)'s review of African American education explored the work of authors Richardson and Murrell, whose works individually assert that the

> persistent gap in achievement between African Americans and their white counterparts . . . is due, in large part to the preponderance of "banking education" methods used in urban schools . . . whereby students are forced to learn skills without connecting them to broader social, political and economic processes in society. (p. 110).

Lynn (2006) said that this process decontextualizes teaching and learning. He found that Murrell's work attempted to move beyond "best practice" discourse to a dynamic ecological

model that "takes full account of the cultural and social dimensions of the development issues of African American learners . . . to argue that learning is an active and interactive process that occurs with an social context" (Lynn, 2006, p. 110).

The critical race frame has been viewed as both a theory and a method by some (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). However, others challenged the critical race frame's ability to extend theory to that of a method for policy analysis. This disconnect might be attributed to the dominance of non-African American perspectives, resulting in a narrow definition of what constitutes empirical approaches or methods. This narrow definition of what counts in terms of policy analysis epistemology fails to fully interpret policy within its situated contexts. What might be perceived as important from a critical race perspective may go unnoticed in the traditional research and policy analysis frame. Traditional policy analysis uses theory in an objective, somewhat decontextualized manner. Critical approaches to research theory (such as CRT) can be very useful as a method of treating the context of policy issues as a living process. That is, a critical race theoretical and policy perspective recognizes that policy is produced to affect the lives of people. It means that people and their experiences must be centered when researching issues that pertain to the communities and people for whom the policy is enacted.

A critical race approach to policy studies recognizes the actions and reactions taken on behalf of people in response to their environment and offers policy solutions with these contextual responses in mind. CRT calls for careful attention to the participant as a part of the policy solution to be undertaken. For example, the following recap of the student's experiences and how they navigated their experiences reflect the critical race frame's attention to participant solutions. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the participants in this study appeared to have devised their own, individual coping strategies to help them navigate the racialized, dichotomous issues at the school level. All 5 students who were college-aspiring members of the university-sponsored CAP carried a firm resolution to attend college, in spite of the obstacles that they faced in school. They used encouraging statements and phrases, citing that they "are going," "must go," "will go," "hope they will go," and most strikingly to me, "*need* to go."

The narratives of this study implied differing levels of *help seeking as a navigational strategy*. Like their peers, Keisha, Grace, and Hope's narratives revealed that their varying levels of effort were often based on decisions around whether their input would indeed pay off. They

appeared to reflect on this in terms of the probability regarding the degree and extent of the pay off. Faith and Craig's narratives, for example, indicated that they utilized multiple supports in and out of school (though their out-of-school supports seemed stronger). Through the critical race method of listening for participant solutions to their experiences, help seeking surfaced as one strategy. From a policy standpoint, this dissertation informs the reader that help is indeed needed for these students. Their narratives help identify that they have alternative ways of seeking help that do not always look like the patterns that school adults may be used to. Therefore, when designing policies around helping students, this critical race inquiry, using these students' narratives, suggests crafting policy around help seeking. This means that school adults must be trained to be able to identify help-seeking behaviors and to support students in ways that show that the return will be a strong one for the student. The theory and research on ethics of care and trust indicated that these policies must be crafted in ways that help create personal connections between school adults and students. Hope's narrative indicated the use of silence and invisibility served as her coping mechanism. This strategy greatly narrowed her help-seeking efforts. She used avoidance and a trial-and-error strategy as a reoccurring coping technique. This finding is particularly interesting when compared to Valenzuela's (1999) study, which found that help seeking signaled student "integration and involvement in schooling" (p. 15).

Yet, school integration does not necessarily indicate effective involvement in school settings, as demonstrated by Oakes's (1985, 1986) research on the impact of tracking and differentiated schooling practices in terms of curriculum and pedagogical approaches. One of the dangers of these student coping strategies is that "social and cultural distance in student–adult relationships and the school culture itself create a false view that students do not care about school" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 63). School adults (and sometimes their own peers) misinterpret these strategies for a lack of care. Educational policies, therefore, must be created that help school adults recognize and address these student-developed strategies.

Interviews with Keisha, Grace, and Hope implied a *preparation and support gap* regarding *cumulative preparation and support* that they perceived their White and affluent peers to have received. They compared such access to their own more recent entry into college-preparation programs and strategies. In the case of 3 student participants who were participants in the CAP, their earliest contact with actual support and preparation for college began in middle school. Although all 5 of the CAP participants reported hearing about college in elementary

school, only 2 articulated experiences that indicated that they did more than hear about college in elementary school (for example, engaging in college site visits). Their narratives implied that middle school engagement that extended beyond simply hearing about college came later for them when compared to their White and more affluent peers. Their peers seemed to receive both preparation and support by the sixth grade and, in many cases, elementary school (according to the student narratives). As a CRT-informed policy consideration, early college awareness and preparation should be integrated throughout the P–12 educational pipeline in order to assure early and consistent support for all students, but with special attention to African American youth.

While it is impressive that the students participating in this study persist even without an army of resources, it should not be their job to suffice in the absence of such supports. Schools of the 21st century must be transformed to provide ongoing, consistent support for all students, regardless of their home and community backgrounds. Interestingly, educational policy and research on preparation for college emphasize middle school inception at the eighth grade as a precursor to high school readiness (Lumina Foundation, 2009a, 2009b). According to the participant narratives, the experiences and perceptions of these participants support otherwise. That is, the introduction and preparation for college must begin at significantly earlier points to help students envision and successfully execute their paths to college. Recall that Hope noted that if she had known early what the expectations were for her regarding college admissions, she would have taken a different approach regarding her preparation.

Another policy consideration warrants the need for culturally inclusive P–2O curricula and pedagogy in public schools. The narratives indicated a racial overtone regarding cumulative support and preparation for college. For the students participating in this project, race and privilege were connected for their White peers. For example, the students in this project perceived their White and affluent peers as having had parents who were in well-founded positions that contributed to their potential success in accessing and navigating college. Specifically, 2 student narratives revealed that these well-situated parents included college professors at the affiliated flagship institution of this study's outreach program. They asserted that such relationships helped affluent students not only to access the institution, but also to navigate their academic and social surroundings once matriculated:

> [The students whose parents are] their teachers who are professors and they [the students] have an advantage cause they can teach them, edit their paper—they talk about it, "Oh, my mom edited my paper," "Oh, my dad flew from Japan and is coming in 2 weeks." It's like they are always bragging with each other. (Grace)
>
> Yeah, sometimes I get really angry with those obnoxious little kids. But I know I am doing fine in my classes. I'm working hard—I don't really care what they say 'cause they'll be coming asking me for help and I get higher grades and they'll be looking at me!" (Keisha)

These quotes demonstrated the role of capital attainment and transmission between parents and students is a reality recognized not only in educational research, but also by the very students attending the schools under study. Furthermore, the narratives substantiated a racial and economic overlay regarding capital transmission. So the issue was about providing not only access for African American and underserved populations, but also equitable P–12 school support and access for postsecondary education. Keisha and Grace indicated that the additional supports acquired by privileged Elite Magnet students through their homes lives need to be provided for all students within schools. This principle as a policy consideration would benefit the transformation of educational outcomes.

Aspirations: Implications for the Development of Personal Capital and College Access

Aspirations were interpreted to be an intrinsic value, an asset or intangible resources that served as a platform for capacity building for college access. These capacity-building systems stemmed from the intangible resources provided by familial support and program interventions like the CAP.

In the narratives of this dissertation, the students articulated their views regarding the importance of aspirations, especially for college, in terms of a shared responsibility between them and the school. They viewed themselves as responsible for putting forth real effort towards academic achievement. Yet, their narratives collectively articulated the role that schools played in directing student aspirations toward college. Student descriptions of their experiences in school indicated that schooling environments indeed influence student aspirations for college; this influence could be positive but was often negative. Their narratives implied that school supports of students' aspirations for college were divergent, supporting some while serving as obstacles to others. Despite the existence of school-based obstacles, the students reflected a sense of determination. They largely reported that obstacles were not a permanent deterrent to

achieving their goals and that they used alternative supports and strategies to move beyond the disruptions and maintain their college aspirations.

However, the degree of success for these student-developed strategies to circumvent school obstacles does not guarantee success for all who employ them. U.S. schools of the 21st century have an ethical, political, and economic responsibility to serve all children successfully. Findings from the narratives of this study implied that successfully serving all students requires efforts in the areas of agency and support, addressing the school environment, building communication through trust and care, and understanding and setting expectations. Educational policies should be focused on helping transform all schools into capacity-building support systems that address assumptions and coping strategies related to the decision-making process of students.

Implications and Capacity-Building Systems Through Support and Intervention

Originally, when I proposed the study, I sought to understand whether the CAP served as the primary source of support for the students participating in the program. I expected to begin the interview process with these students and thereby develop a starting context for understanding these students' aspiration for college. Early in the study, I referred to the institutional support systems (like the CAP) of the students as capacity-building interventions. I used the term *intervention* to demonstrate my interpretation of this program as interrupting or as standing in for the absence of constructive, deep, and consistent support from the school these students attended. This assumption was based on my own experience as an administrator at the school site. I recognized then that the school-based support system for preparing students for college was weak in terms of a detailed, intentional preparation and readiness curriculum. In fact, college readiness was not a regular part of the school curriculum at all for a disproportionate segment of the African American student population.

During the course of this exploratory study, I learned that the participating students had access to both formal and informal supports that involved their familial connections and network ties via intervening program membership. All of the 5 students enrolled in the university-sponsored CAP viewed it as an intentional space for college readiness. All 5 of the students enrolled in the program reported that they were regularly and consistently reminded of benchmark events like testing dates and admissions deadlines. Exposure to direct tutoring, supplemental instruction in the subject areas that colleges required for admission (math

workshops, for example), and familial expectations served as motivating supports as they navigated the process of accessing college.

All 7 of the students interviewed indicated that parental support was provided in the form of verbal cues to keep going, to remain in a program or to remain on track. Other forms of parental and familial support indicated by all 7 of the student participants included enrolling the students into other support programs.

The findings of this study indicated that that the university sponsored CAP did indeed intervene for many of its students as institutional capacity building. Therefore, policies that expand similar initiatives in schools and as free-standing centers would have promising outcomes for improving the educational pipeline for the state and nation.

The findings imply that the capacity-building system involving people as networks for these youth is better described as *capacity-building support*. All 7 participants emphasized familial support (parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, for example) but also repeatedly expressed the role that positive relations with school adults like teachers and counselors *should* play. This finding has a particularly important policy implication that affirms the need for care-centered, culturally relevant, youth-oriented school environments. Wiggan (2007) called for a youth-centered educational research agenda. By extension, I submit that educational policy would benefit greatly from a youth-centered approach, emphasizing students as "knowers instead of subjects" (Wiggan, 2008, p. 324). I believe that this dissertation answered Wiggan's call. I address the matter at the conclusion of this dissertation.

For those students not attending the university-sponsored CAP highlighted in this study, their experiences reflected parental and familial support as the intervening factor for their schooling experiences. The narratives of all of the participants also demonstrated that their own personal drive was a major factor in their processes of navigating the path to college. College aspirations, then, served as a far stronger factor of persistence, in spite of the various obstacles presented by the schooling process for the 7 youth of this study. Their narratives implied three steps that linked their aspirations to their navigation of accessing college:

1. An early introduction to college as expected creates both aspirations and excitement for higher education. The students participating in this study demonstrated that they were introduced to the concept of college through early exposure, as early as elementary school in most cases. Whether through discussion, via college visits, or by having access to family

members with educational backgrounds, early exposure acknowledging college as the goal serves as the strike of a virtual aspirational match. Therefore, the fire for college must be lit early.

2. The culture of college readiness must entail depth and consistency of caring between adults and students in school. Student narratives of this study demonstrated that these students require school adults to express deep and earnest commitment, deep interest, and deep caring for their progress as students and as humans.

3. Students require a legitimate college-ready curriculum and an engaging school environment to support the college-ready curriculum. The students participating in this study demonstrated that they are very much in tune with the legitimate behaviors, assumptions, and values that school adults place on them. Their narratives revealed that for each and every adult–student relationship, these students determine the legitimacy of the adults before committing to work for them in class and school. If the students ascertain insincere motivations on behalf of the adult, they put in the least amount of effort required to pass, while saving their own energy for navigating the college access path on their own, using their own strategies. These strategies may or may not work (e.g., trial and error), but all 7 of the students participating in this study used some trajectory strategy, be it consistent persistence (keep going no matter what), drop-down, or so on, to propel them through high school with high hopes that the approach would land them into college.

For the student respondents, personal responsibility was coupled with their expectations of adult support in schools. The findings revealed a sense of personal responsibility on behalf of the students. They did not believe that it was up to the adults in their schools to carry them through the process of P–12 schooling. Rather, these student narratives revealed that Faith, Craig, Hope, Keisha, Grace, Shawn, and Simone believed that adults are to serve as mentors to coach them through high school and into college. Simone referred to her discussion of a particular teacher she believes is not patient enough as a mentor and coach: “I mean, you have to remember we still need help here.”

All 7 students regarded adults as having prior knowledge to be transmitted to them about navigating the college process. These findings support the importance of developing and transmitting capital within schools. While the educational research literature discusses capital as assets transmitted within social class (e.g., social and cultural capital), neighborhoods, and

families, these students' narratives indicated the need to transmit these forms of capital by transforming schools into capacity-building spaces. These narratives indicated that all of these students believe capacity building and its resulting capital transmission to be the responsibility of their schools. An important element of this finding is that the narratives do not limit capital development and transmission in schools to that of human capital, as is commonly associated with schools. It suggests that all forms of capital essential to student learning be developed as the responsibility of schools charged with building capacity as a standard of their environment and culture. The dissertation findings also suggest that the development of schools as capacity-building spaces can intermingle the transmission of these forms of capital in order to access other forms of capital. This finding is promising because it addresses an ongoing debate about the boundaries of school responsibilities regarding student development. It is also promising because the solution has been derived from the perspectives of the students themselves, a primary objective of this study in line with the CRT frame, in an attempt to center student voice in educational policy

Taken together, the findings imply a broad area of need within this particular school site. However, the literature revealed that these issues impact students across the United States. Noguera (2008) wrote of the need to create broader, bolder approaches to education through the expansion of school accountability measures beyond a culture of high-stakes testing. Current emphasis on achievement overlooks the opportunity to develop culturally relevant schooling environments as capacity-building systems that engage students. This dissertation finding reflects Yosso's (2002) work on critical race curriculum and Ladson-Billings (1994) work on culturally relevant pedagogy and the hegemonic practices inherent in traditional school curricula. Tillman's (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2008) work on culturally sensitive research in leadership practices can be used to redirect policy concerning the way we train and prepare educational leaders and the schools that they serve.

The findings of this dissertation, derived from the narratives of students, operate in the tradition of CRT by centering their perspectives. That the students identified racial constructs within their school experiences validates CRT as a theory that acknowledges the ingrained experience of race and the knowledge of the participants as experts. The findings also reflected the presence of manipulative school practices such as tracking (Gentry & Peele, 1995; Oakes, 1985, 1986) related to racial hegemony (Hilliard, 1998, 2000c).

Though this study reflects many problems inherent in U.S. schools, the student narratives also provide reason for hope. We can transcend hope to action through policy. Their experiences with capacity-building systems through their familial support and nonschool interventions surrounding positive relationships where trust and care where evident should call attention to the work of Valenzuela (1999) and Delpit (1996) and their theories about the ethic of care.

The findings imply that successful educational policy must be centered on creating capacity-building school sites that engage students through culturally sensitive, culturally relevant, college-ready curricula and pedagogical practices. In order to be productive, educational policy must engage students by initiating strong teacher–student relationships. Counternarratives, a concept of the critical race framework across academic disciplines, reflects the untold views of marginalized people who are often missing or negatively portrayed in the larger majoritarian (Yosso, 2002) descriptions provided by the dominant culture. The term *counternarrative* reflects opposition to these majoritarian or "stock" descriptions by focusing on minority voices as central sources of knowledge.

While support systems had value, student narratives revealed a firm, consistent belief that their ultimate supports linking their aspirations for college to their access to higher education should be the responsibility and purpose of their school. This finding supports the three action steps linking student aspirations to college access:

1. The narratives collectively point towards the need for an early introduction to college as the benchmark standard of P–12 education.

2. In order to build upon student aspirations for college, schools must have a college-readiness culture that is characterized by deep, consistent care by adults for the youth in their school.

3. Students require a legitimate college-ready curriculum and an engaging school environment to support the college-ready curriculum and pedagogy for teaching and learning.

The identification and exploration of student perspectives regarding success in the college access pipeline posited some important considerations. First, it pointed toward an important recipe for success within the relationship between students' aspirations for college, their capacity-building systems, and the academic and social development of African American students. An outcome of this approach was the relationship between these variables, including care and trust, and their impact on the development of school as capacity-building spaces and the

potential for capital development and transmission in terms of the academic and social development of students. This study provided an account of student perspectives as an important piece of the policy puzzle pertaining to the P–20 educational pipeline. Their narratives provided insight as to what worked for them and what had not worked. From their insights, a discussion on what was needed to address and include their disengaged peers followed. Findings from this study have implications for aspirational components of youth development and P–20 education policy. Furthermore, explorations of this study may lead to much-needed strategies concerning school and district college-pipeline efforts in the K–12 educational setting.

Contributions of the Study

This study contributed to the field in three important areas:

1. First, the study provided a space in the literature to gather African American youth's perspectives on the relationship between capacity-building systems that supported their own college aspirations.

2. This dissertation found that schools construct racialized identities of African American students. This finding adds a new dimension to the prevailing theoretical assumption that students create oppositional identities to resist school. While some students may use oppositional identities as strategies, the findings of this dissertation pointed to other constructed strategies. Furthermore, these constructed approaches were used in settings where care and trust were not communicated to students by schools and school adults. This new finding on schools' role in racializing student identities warrants further investigation but does respond to calls in the literature for research that examines unequal schooling experiences as a result of differential treatment of students by race.

3. This dissertation contributed to the discourse on the role of care in schools, adding that the relationship between care and trust in adult–student relationships is an important factor in school success and student achievement.

In the liberating tradition of critical race framework, accessing the experiences and perspectives "of the people" is the defining element of this study. We often hear about the pitfalls of minority students, their families, and their communities. There is general emphasis on this deficit perspective as the public education system strains under a multitude of contending factors about the achievement of African American students. Lacking are educational policy

studies that center student voice in the development, description, and analysis of the research findings, particularly those pertinent to their own experiences (Wiggan, 2007).

Furthermore, changing neo-conservative sentiment toward policies such as affirmative action, initially intended to uplift racially marginalized populations, have endured consistent criticism in the public and higher education. There is increasing concern that African Americans unable to access college (especially 4-year institutions) will only become more marginalized, increasing their chances for incarceration, poverty, and a generally poor quality of life (Hilliard, 1987, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). Considering that the affirmative policies in employment and education contributed to the establishment of the African American middle class (Karabel, 2006; Massey et al., 2003) and the impact that their reversal and neo-conservative notions of an "urban underclass" have had (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 6), it should come as little surprise to see the impact of reversing or minimizing these affirmative efforts. The result is tantamount to gambling the educational outcomes of African American students. For some, success in accessing college is obtained, whereas for others, just persisting through secondary school proves to be its own challenge.

This study, through the narratives of students, explored what students believed to work, what they perceived to fail, and the direction that their perspectives may contribute towards improved policy and practice around college access. Thus, a strength concerning a contribution of this study is its application for policy studies. In her research on the parental involvement of Mexican American mothers, Scheurich and Young (1997) articulated a new approach to policy studies. Their method involved the use of a multiple frame to provide a broader perspective of the study under investigation. Scheurich and Young asserted, "Factors hidden from the view of one perspective may be illuminated by another, providing a more informed space from which to shape policy" (p. 17). In the same tradition, the use of counternarratives, emphasizing student voice, provided a means for broadening the lens through which policymakers can observe and address the needs and circumstances facing young African Americans in education (Wiggan, 2007). The use of interviews to gather narratives as my primary data collecting strategy, the reporting of the data using narrative description via extended block quotes, and the use of CRT to conduct an analysis and discussion of the data findings, represent a multiframed approach. Counternarratives can be developed from sources other than the interview (e.g., film, printed articles, etc.). However, the use of counternarratives from multiple participants on the same

subject offered multiple perspectives, which I believed to speak to the spirit of Young's framework.

A final thought about the contributions of this study is the opportunity it provided to place a familiar face on educational policy. The 7 African American youth of this study, through their narratives, counter deficit assumptions about who they are as African American and as educational constituents. Therein lies the potential to emphasize among education policy, research, and practice the role that each student's aspirations play as a foundational (albeit intrinsic) element for accessing college.

Inferences

Wolcott (1994) described inference as an interpretive approach for making sense of data, "to bridge from the known to the unknown" (p. 40). As such I present a set of theoretical assumptions based on the findings of this dissertation. I present them next, followed by the study conclusion, suggestions for future research, and reflections on author position.

Inferences About the Relationship Between Society and Schools and Their Effect on Student Achievement

Regarding the relationship between society and schools, I make four inferences:

1. Yes, schools do reproduce societal stratification and inequities along racial lines that are often associated with low socioeconomic status.

2. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between societal stratification and school stratification that is structured along racial and socioeconomic lines.

3. As a result, this replication of societal stratification in schools means that it is the distribution and subtraction of economic and sociopolitical resources, *not* the mere presence of minorities in schools (whether the schools have high minority populations or not) that predetermine how resources and expertise are distributed to populations including students of color.

4. This replication and reciprocity of racial stratification plays out at two levels, local school level and educator preparation. First, societal racial stratification impacts the attitudes, beliefs, and values of White or nonminority authority figures who make critical decisions about who is educated in school and in what ways, or how different student populations are educated. At the local school level, this includes teachers, principals, counselors, curriculum specialists, security officers. At an extended level, this includes policymakers. Second, because societal

racial stratification plays out throughout the life processes of people of color (e.g., schooling options and knowledge access from elementary through graduate education and educator certification), there are fewer educators of color, especially African American educators. The decreased presence of people of color in multiple positions in schools results in an empathy mismatch between students of color and adults in school. That is, schools remain insufficiently aware of how their thinking and decision making are racialized. Therefore, limited empathy for the effect of racial stratification on students of color exacerbates differential treatment of students by race in schools.

Inferences About the Relational Development Process of Students

Regarding the relational development process of students, I make six inferences:

1. Adult–student reciprocity requires respect, trust, commitment, and clear communication.

2. Students, including students of color, do indeed care about what the adults in their lives believe about them both in and out of school.

3. Students are aware of the differential treatment that is accorded in their school by race. They are aware that this differential treatment stratifies access to knowledge and curricula to prepare them for college, which they view as a path for improving the socioeconomic condition of themselves and their family.

4. Students develop strategies to navigate their stratified school experiences. While the students in this study described some peer experiences that denoted Ogbu's (2008) concept of oppositional identity, the student participants did not use oppositional identities. Instead, they critiqued their in-school peers and siblings who exhibited oppositional identities. In addition, the student narratives described school-constructed racial identities.

5. The students in this study appeared to pull support from outside of their school experiences, primarily from home and their involvement with nonschool programs (like the CAP and the HBCU) to help them navigate their formal school environments. They used their intangible resources outside of school (e.g., support and encouragement, network affiliation with college-preparation programs) to access tangible resources in school (curriculum access and counselor-related resources like college applications).

6. The presence and maintenance of aspirations indicates that purpose and intrinsic drive are important foundations from which the students of this study begin their quest for accessing

college. When supported, capacity building creates a relational connection between student aspirations and how they develop socially and academically. Adult–student reciprocity in relationship building that is based on respect, care, and trust is important to this process.

Taken together, achievement, which has been narrowly defined in the literature to that of standardized tests and grade point averages, takes on an expanded identity. This new conceptualization of achievement accounts for both academic and social developmental processes of students of color and the ways that intangible resources (support, belief, aspirations, respect, trust) and tangible resources are related as capacity-building systems.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented interpretive findings regarding students' perspective of the links among college aspirations, capacity-building systems, and academic and social development for African American students attending a Texas high school. The study was based on two primary research questions:

1. In what ways do student aspirations intersect with capacity-building systems for college?

2. How does that intersection impact the academic and social development of student aspirations towards college?

The operating assumptions and premises that I began the study with included recognition that the school system, especially the school identified for this study, was not enough. That is, I understood that the school was not providing the African American students in this dissertation with all of the elements required to prepare for and access college. This stemmed from a larger issue of public schools and equitable education for African Americans. In terms of author position, my experience as an administrator in the school of this study enabled me to recognize that poor college readiness in terms of academic preparation and social development was a major problem for Black students attending Bush High School and, in many ways, the Elite Magnet Program. Additional support systems were required and utilized by African American students as strategic preparation and support alternatives to navigate the public high school system and access college. For this second premise, formal capacity-building systems such as the CAP served as intervening supports and were included in this dissertation for that reason.

Capacity-building systems like the interventions provided by the CAP of this study were not serving all African American students due to capacity restraints, among other probable

concerns. Therefore, another issue involved understanding the strategies students who were not formally in the CAP (or quite possibly any formal intervention program) employed to navigate the college pathway. I wanted to understand whether these students had aspirations for college as well, whether they had support systems, and what or who those systems were.

While the school was not the intended focus of this dissertation, the student narratives demonstrated that the school served as a major site concerning these students' academic and social development. Although the narratives indicated that the students received both academic and social support from the CAP and other supplemental intervention programs, they viewed the development of their academic and social development as the primary responsibility of their formal schools. The narratives demonstrated that the students participating in this dissertation developed strategies to navigate their school experiences as they were, for better or for worse. College outreach programs such as the CAP and familial supports served as part of these students' coping strategies. In school, the students participating in this dissertation utilized coping strategies such as dropping from the magnet program to the "regular" academic tracks in the nonmagnet school, housed at the same location. This move benefited those African American students who were concerned with maintaining their academic ranking in order to gain access to a Texas public college or university. Silence, trial and error, and consistent persistence were other strategies that the students participating in this study utilized in their attempts to navigate the process of transitioning from high school to college.

This dissertation uncovered three major findings pertaining to trust, care, and racial identity. These major themes also included a subset of additional factors: expectations and assumptions, agency and support, and communication and resources. Findings among these themes indicated that the school environment created exclusionary practices via stratified curriculum and pedagogical practices.

A new contribution of this study's finding for education research is the role of personal aspirations as an intrinsic value to building college aspirations and access. This study centered on student voice as a primary tool for educational policy development. The findings have recentered the role of familial support and capacity-building interventions via supplemental support programs as important tools for the academic and social development of African American students. The nurturing of personal and college aspirations as capital is an important intrinsic tool to help students to access college. Unlike deficit theories that devalue or decenter family,

community, and student peer support (Coleman, 1966; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Ogbu, 1987, 2008; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986), the narrative descriptive findings of this dissertation demonstrated that trust, care, and support work in tandem with students' personal aspirations for success in accessing college.

I began this study recognizing my personal belief that the school from which my student participants came was not directly meeting these students' college readiness needs or expectations. I contend that early experiences that help young P–12 students thrive and the development of skill sets to address times when these experiences are lacking are necessary. These experiences and skills help in the development of adults who can recall their P–12 experiences to support their pipeline pathways later in life, particularly at the graduate level. One example is the expectation by some graduate students that they are going to "get that terminal degree," just as the students of my study expect that they are going to gain admissions to college**.**

Central tenets of my assertions around aspirations for college and success are the following:

1. Aspirations exist to some degree in all students

2. Aspiration can be increased for success or left to their current or decreased levels for failure.

3. The influence of aspirations is impacted by schooling practices and support environments, whether supplemental or formal engagements. The findings of this study demonstrated that students' support systems were overt but often subtle.

One of the intended purposes of this dissertation was to center student voice within educational policy. Students, especially P–12 students, are constituents in a policy realm that has tended to operate without them. Just 2 months after I proposed this topic as my dissertation line of inquiry, Wiggan (2007) published an article that outlined a call for a youth-centered educational research agenda. In it, he called for a research methodology that presented "students' actual words" as "knowers instead of subjects" (p. 324). I believe that this dissertation, which used a narrative descriptive format to report the findings, directly answered Wiggan's call. Other examples of how this study centered student voice in educational research and policy, and thereby answered Wiggan's (2007) call, included the use of a "student-based inquiry approach . . . [to] capture the perspectives of students regarding achievement and what Dewey (1916) called

school-level processes" (p. 324). This dissertation speaks to Wiggan's (2007) account of four areas that he believed educational research overlooked:

> (a) examine the meaning of student achievement among students; (b) determine students' perceptions about the quality of instruction they receive; (c) identify the climate at the school level which students believe places them at risk for low achievement; and (d) investigate the educational progress and solutions students believe to be necessary for improving school achievement. (p. 325)

The findings of this study are both sobering and exciting. On one end, the stark racial inequalities in student experiences are disheartening. Yet, the narrative findings voiced through the student participants offer an exciting new direction for educational policy and research that places youth voice as a central contributor to the field of education studies. In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the intentions of CRT and of narrative research and inquiry. It propels a new line of inquiry, method, and policy solutions.

Suggestions for Future Studies

I recommend four areas that could extend the work of this dissertation. The first would involve a follow-up study exploring interschool transfer strategies to extend what is known about the relationship between students' decision-making processes and coping strategies for academic and social development. Another study could directly investigate the relationship between the magnet program and the community school sharing the same location. This would present itself as a timely follow-up study to Oakes's (1985, 1986) research on tracking and stratified school practices. In addition, a longitudinal investigation of the students who participated in this precollege study on access that explores the transition of the students during their freshman year in college, their persistence during their sophomore through junior years, and their success as they graduate would create a broader perspective for P–20 pipeline issues surrounding college preparation, access, transition, and success. Finally, more studies that examine the differential treatment of students in school by race are warranted in research and policy.

Reflections on Author Position

Earlier I considered the impact that early experiences in P–12 settings might have on the future of the students in this study as they went on to graduate school. Noting the intensity of power dynamics between professors and students in graduate school, I recognized through my own experiences as a doctoral candidate the challenges that lay ahead for these students. I grappled with my own process in obtaining my Ph.D., understanding that the work of others in

the field and determining my own contributions and critiques in a progressive manner entail a need for some sense of organization and support. The process, while understandably isolating, also requires an avenue for sharing one's ideas, theories, and anticipated direction for inquiry and research. Another side to this process involves embracing the courage to name one's uncertainties, mistakes, and failures in the process. We naturally assume that this role will be undertaken and coaxed by our dissertation committee members, but these, too, represent mentor–mentee relationships that require deep, collective, consistent communication and trust, just as P–12 teacher–student relationships do. Like the students participating in this study, there are issues of doubt, trust, and mistrust.

I am cognizant that there are multiple ways to interpret the findings of my data, as the information provided through these narratives are both rich and dynamic. This presentation of a collective of narratives is somewhat shaped by my interpretations that stemmed (in part) from some of my own experiences as a practitioner, as a person of color, and through my own understanding and interpretation of various bodies of literature across the disciplines. These disciplines in sociology, education (e.g., curriculum and instruction, higher education, educational psychology), anthropology, and cultural studies specifically included the following frameworks that guided my inquiry and analysis: CRT, narrative research, youth development beyond formal schooling, and critical policy analysis. These factors collectively have impacted how I interpreted the meaning and value of each respondent's interview.

My objective for reporting the findings was to remain true to the essence of what each participant's narrative provided. Indeed, the subjects of the study demonstrated their perspective with a passion and clarity that permitted me to accomplish this. I find this important because it demonstrates the agency that my participants enacted as both "knowers" of their own experiences and as youth with intrinsic purpose. I believe that my age and experiences permitted me to play another role, that of the interpreter. An important aspect of my study was to respect my participants' voices. In this case, the students were central to the unfolding of the narrative and the phenomenon under inquiry. Six of the 7 student participants commented on what I can only describe as my "presence." The combination of my appearance—African American like them, well dressed—and my calm but enthusiastic demeanor provided me with a sense of balance and connection to my students and to the parents who on occasion accompanied them. The students indicated directly and indirectly that they sensed that I cared and that I could relate

to them, or that they related to me. My age was just young enough for them to believe that my experiences, similar to their own, were at least somewhat relevant. I sensed as I listened to their stories that my experience as a former student in settings that they would have found familiar, and as a caring adult trying to positively impact the case of education for students like them, provided me with enough wisdom to articulate some of the issues that they communicated. My position also enabled me to help communicate to the reader issues that the students appeared to have trouble expressing (refer back to the narratives of Faith and Hope in chapter 4). At the very least, it became apparent that I was interested in the specific narratives of the experiences and perspectives that each student participant brought to this study. This interest and care appeared as a reoccurring theme throughout this dissertation; it speaks to the reflexive process between researcher, participant, and reader as a part of the critical, interpretive narrative process.

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